

# Diary of a Volunteer

by Darlene Sprague, VLRP season-long volunteer on Lake Groton

(From the Vermont Loon Caller Publication)

It seems, that from the very first time I saw one I was hooked. That haunting call. I was drawn deeper, with a need to see and hear more, eventually to volunteer and assist as a child reared on Lake Groton, I used to hear them, but I don't believe I ever saw one. Years later when I returned as an adult, they drove me crazy. I had to know more. I did research, went to all the available talks, seminars, and educational functions in my area. I began to keep data on their comings and goings at the lake, and armed with this information I began my journey, which included a nice young man, my mentor, Eric Hanson, the state loon biologist.

I was currently participating in the yearly loon census, and it made me feel good to be collecting important data about loons throughout Vermont. I contacted Eric in early summer of the year 1999 about a potential loon pair forming on Groton. After many phone conversations and several canceled meetings (due to loon emergencies of course!), we finally met. It was late August and it was my goal to convince him that the lake had a genuine need for a nesting platform. After we crossed the brook below the dam and climbed the wooded hill overlooking the lake, we were treated to a most spectacular sight. Swimming quietly before us was a pair of adult loons. This cinched it! He gave me go ahead to put a platform out the next spring, I was happy and could hardly wait (Thank you God!)

After ice out, Eric, several other volunteers, and I gathered at the shoreline to help assemble a nesting platform. It was snowing and very cold. The platform was placed on a borrowed rowboat and towed by a team of devoted volunteers with kayaks into the cold blowing wind. Upon arrival, the heavy platform had to be unloaded off the rowboat, and volunteers prowled the shoreline for sod, small bushes, and assorted vegetation to cover the platform. In my little homemade rowboat, I carried a bale of straw, which would be the first layer to cover the mesh. Next came the mud, sod, and small bushes and loose vegetation. Then the platform was towed out from shore to its final resting place. Cinder blocks, attached to the platform by cables, were lowered into the water at calculated distances from the platform to allow for rising water and shifting winds. After a few final adjustments, we left the area. Now the monitoring began. After four weeks and no activity I was becoming discouraged. Eric encouraged me to not give up saying it sometimes takes years before a pair will adopt a site and nest. I continued to monitor weekly with zero activity. Then it happened. I checked on a Monday in mid-June, nothing. (It was getting late for nesting.) Then I checked again on Thursday, and OH MY GOSH, there was a loon on the nest and one in the water. My heart pounded, my throat was dry, I kept looking. I could not believe my eyes. I ran to my car and drove to a phone. I was so excited to spread the news to Eric and my husband, I was so proud, so pleased, with a feeling of true accomplishment.

The next project was to put out the floating signs to warn off boaters from the site. Eric and I worked very quietly and quickly to do this, so as not to disturb the loons. However, even at a distance of 200-300 feet, the loon slipped off the nest. However, within minutes of leaving the area, the loon returned to the platform and back onto the nest (If the nest site were established, the signs would be put out at the same time as the platform.) In just a few short days, a nightmare began for the loons and me. Word had gotten around the lake that we had a nesting pair at the south end of the lake. That area became more like a drive-in theater. Campers and residents from the lake parked their boats by the floating signs, peering at the loons through binoculars and all the while, laughing, talking, and taking pictures. I was beside myself with fear of what the stress and disturbances might do to them. The news of the nesting loons even made it onto a local radio talk show. Park rangers were getting phone calls from folks wanting to see them. It seemed that despite the warning signs, folks could not resist seeking them out. I made a panicky phone call to Eric; he calmed me down, I was new at this and nervous, All our hard work was in jeopardy.

Some folks scoffed at the idea that these birds were shy, and they would totally ignore the nest warning signs. So with Eric's help and encouragement. we decided the key to this situation would be education. We began a door-to-

door campaign on the lake. Armed with brochures and pamphlets chucked full of information about the effects of disturbance to nesting sites, two other volunteers and I headed out. The folks I was able to talk to had many questions and were for the most part interested in what I had to say. And for the people I didn't find at home, I tucked information in their doorways. More information and handout were left at the campgrounds and more signs and posters were put up. I became an ambassador talking with boaters trying my best to help them understand the situation. That year, lake residents called the one surviving chick Pinocchio. I called him a little miracle.

Three years have passed now. The first year was hard. The second was somewhat better due to the education. But the third year (2002) was again as disturbing as the first, because of constant territorial challenges and boat harassment. After what seemed like an especially noisy dawn of loon calls one August morning, I observed that one chick was missing. The pair and a chick glided by the cottage in the heavy fog. I kept scanning the lake for the missing chick and soon spotted something floating on the east side of the lake, where I had earlier heard the calls. I rowed nearer to the floating object with my two grandchildren. My suspicion proved correct. My reaction overwhelmed me. Tears came to my eyes; How could this have happened? The loon parents, myself and many helpful, well-meaning lake residents and volunteers had worked so hard to protect and rear this baby. Now our efforts had been in vain. I retrieved the carcass of the soft downy 7 1/2-week-old chick out of the water. We may never know what happened, but Eric guesses that an intruder loon may have killed the chick in hopes of taking over the territory. Eric says this type of behavior is becoming more common as the loon population increases. We hope the cause of death was not a boat collision.

Eric retrieved the carcass from me and sent it to Tufts University for analysis. As of this writing, we don't know what they found. This was the second time I had held a loon. The first time was rescuing an adult that had somehow gone over the dam. I was elated to release that bird back onto the lake. This second time I was saddened and ready to give up. Too often, whether we like it or not, no matter how hard we try to manage a situation, sometimes it just doesn't go our way. I haven't gotten over this year. Follow Up Article on the 2002 Dead Loon Chick.

Many times, I have chased windblown signs, replaced and repaired broken cables, and erected new signs to have it happen again. The south bay gets hammered by Groton's high winds, although the platform is protected by large boulders. I've had some ups and downs with this project. I have learned that some folks actually don't like loons. . . "a nuisance, eat too many fish, too noisy, always in the way of my boat." My answer to all this is that loons were here long before us and they have as much right to be here as we do. On the up side, I think I have made a difference. Tending the loons can be hard work if you put your heart into it. I love that shy black and white checkered bird that sometimes drives me crazy with worry and grief. You have just got to love it to keep at it. The rewards are fantastic. Once again, I am looking forward to 2003. I long for the lake and the cry of the loons.