

WATERBIRDS

JOURNAL OF THE WATERBIRD SOCIETY

VOL. 37

SPECIAL PUBLICATION I

2014

Preface to the Loon Workshop Proceedings, North American Ornithological Conference, University of British Columbia, 14 August 2012

Sometimes the natural history of a particular line of scientific inquiry in our field is just as important to contemplate as the biology of the organisms involved, in this case, the family of loons. What appears in the following pages is a series of technical, peer-reviewed papers commonly related to loon biology and conservation and that represent the proceedings of the workshop titled *The Status of Gavia: Conservation in Black and White* held August 14, 2012, at the University of British Columbia as part of the 5th North American Ornithological Conference. A few papers not presented there have been added for good measure and commensurate scientific scrutiny. Each of them speaks well for itself. I would like to reflect instead on how we arrived at this point in the evolution of such proceedings and on the significance of this workshop. Allow me to begin with a bit of Common Loon conservation history, with which I am rather familiar, as context for conferences of epochs past and present. We shall begin in New Hampshire, where I entered this phylogeny.

In 1975, Rawson L. Wood, a retired New Hampshire businessman and member of the boards of both the National Audubon Society and the independent Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH), proposed to the board of ASNH that they establish a committee to monitor and conserve the Common Loons of New Hampshire. The Audubon Society of New Hampshire's director at the time, Tudor Richards, had already collected observations and data illustrating the Common Loon's striking decline in nesting numbers across the state, and Wood summered on the shore of Squam Lake and wished not to lose the Gavian choir there or elsewhere in New Hampshire. His proposal was approved, and he was promptly appointed chair of the brand-new Loon Pres-

ervation Committee (LPC). By the time he returned to Squam's shores for the summer of 1976, LPC had effectively become New Hampshire's Common Loon recovery project.

By 1978, LPC was being flooded with requests for assistance in how to start up a loon recovery program, how to survey loons and activate volunteer observers, and how and when to use artificial nesting islands. A volunteer observation corps had been established in Minnesota in 1970, but it was LPC that took the lead as Wood pulled together his local and national resources.

I find no record of any first North American conference on loons, but from hearsay I suspect that it may have occurred circa 1977 in Syracuse, New York, and that Wood, Dr. Judith McIntyre of Midwestern loon research fame and subsequently the Oikos Foundation, Dick Plunkett of the National Audubon Society, and Scott Sutcliffe (director of LPC) were integral participants. Heaven knows what exactly they talked (and laughed) about back then, but knowing those characters, solemn discussion and friendly laughter were intermixed. A continent-wide conservation movement was born.

The Proceedings of the Second North American Conference on Common Loon Research and Management in 1979, sponsored and published by the National Audubon Society and edited by Sutcliffe, presented information on initial techniques for banding loons (at that time still not highly functional due to lack of an efficacious capture technique); migration; suspected meanings of loon calls (William Barklow's work and recordings that would later give the North American Loon Fund (NALF) its start-up income through sales of the LP *Voices of the Loon*); effects of water-level fluctuations on loon nesting success; State loon population surveys for Maine, Ver-

mont, New Hampshire, and New York; roles of government agencies and public education; and newly developed use of artificial floating nesting islands for loons (developed from McIntyre's research techniques by Wood and Sutcliffe for New Hampshire management); as well as a plan for moving forward by Plunkett of the National Audubon Society. We were all so proud to be in those pages, and rightfully so, basic and seminal as those pages were. The attending parties were already in the process of planning a national loon information clearinghouse.

Shortly after that second conference in 1979, largely due to Wood's behest, those same luminaries founded NALF to take over the dissemination of information and help fund other nascent loon conservation organizations and research projects. For nearly a decade, NALF continued to meet annually and share reports, but apparently without publishing proceedings.

The 1987 meeting's proceedings, sponsored and published by NALF and edited by Paul Strong, delved more deeply into loon research and management and expanded the population survey reports across the Pacific Northwest and into Yellowstone and eight additional northern tier States, plus Canada. In 1993, editors Linda Morse, Sally Stockwell, and Mark Pokras were able to establish a section on contaminants and diseases, add Alaska to the survey reports, and move into population dynamics in their proceedings drawn from the 1992 conference sponsored by Maine Audubon, NALF, Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Clearly, NALF's efforts to convene scientists were gaining respect and attention from non-governmental organizations, academia, and agencies.

By 1997, the last loon symposium proceedings published by NALF were sponsored by Mercer Companies, Inc. of New York and edited by McIntyre and David Evers of Biodiversity Research Institute in 2000. Therein, 14 States and Canada reported survey findings, outnumbering the other scientific papers. In more than one way, the content of the final NALF proceedings reflects the rea-

sons for NALF's success as well as its eventual retirement.

The North American Loon Fund had set out with the goals of helping establish, with shared information and grubstake funding, loon monitoring and conservation projects parallel to Minnesota's loon monitoring and conservation program (later melded with Wisconsin Project Loon Watch) and New Hampshire's LPC throughout the Common Loon's range in North America; providing clearinghouse information and news sources including newsletters, reprints, educational materials, and symposia; and helping to fund new scientific studies. It succeeded on every front. The NALF affiliate projects ranged from Maine to Washington and across Canada to Alaska. It functioned as a key nexus for the majority of loon conservation efforts and took a leadership role on the lead sinker issue. And through memberships, sponsorships, donations, and catalog sales, NALF raised many thousands of dollars in support of these goals, as well as new scientific investigations. Here was a rare success for a non-governmental organization: it had achieved its goals.

Many dozens of scientists were investigating issues on all five species of loons from Maine to Alaska—and the old NALF connections were still creating bonds among new colleagues and fostering the sharing of information in ever-growing circles. But many of these scientists and projects were soon attracting grants in magnitudes that dwarfed what NALF could raise through its memberships, donations, and small loon aficionado gift catalog. In fact, many of its members and donations and sales were absorbed by its hungry and growing affiliates—the projects of local and statewide and Canadian efforts, that, because of the NALF's guidance and support, were flourishing.

Its affiliates grew into autonomy. Loon science became ubiquitous in various agencies, universities, and non-governmental organizations across the continent—and it became more complex, hi-tech, and expensive: the stuff of much larger grants and many more formal papers in larger, more powerful technical journals than NALF's proceedings. And so in July 2004, NALF retired its formal efforts, sending its remaining grant

money to benefit the Sigurd T. Olson loon research award, managed by the Sigurd Olson Institute of Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin.

Of course numerous other valuable loon-related technical papers have appeared in formal, peer-reviewed journals since the 1950s. But the symposia, for which NALF had been responsible for organizing, offered more than simple publication of results and findings from research projects. A symposium or workshop is a scientific event that brings together scientists and other interested individuals—students, volunteers, observers, even financial supporters. The best of journals offer a scattering of solid technical papers; but gathering together, as at a themed symposium or workshop, offers the opportunity for these scientists and others to interact face-to-face.

It was precisely this personal interaction that NALF offered the developing cadre of loon-thinkers from 1979 to 2004—not just the sharing of important information during the formal presentations, but the chance to play together and share ideas (e.g., efficiently capturing loons to color-band them with individual color schemes, which Evers accomplished and brought to NALF in the early 1990s), some of them far-fetched, in the convivial atmosphere of cafes and taverns and along quiet shorelines after hours. Of course such conviviality is fed by the formality earlier in the day. The two must be connected: the formal lectures presenting new ideas and findings and theories, and the off-record free-form discussion later tearing them apart for analysis and discovery as well as exploring and cementing colleague's connections, and thus the furtherance of creative science. It was this conviviality that was most mourned when NALF ceased calling for papers. Seeing each other over forks and glasses was just as important as contemplating χ^2 -values and standard deviations.

This current collection of technical, peer-reviewed papers related to the Gaviidae, repre-

sents the new epoch in the progression of loon research and science. Driven by the leadership of the Biodiversity Research Institute's Center for Loon Conservation and editors Jim Paruk, Jay Mager, and David Evers, the workshop and proceedings include, for example, papers on molecular genetic determination of gender in Common Loons, political and landscape evaluations for Common Loons, hydrocarbon threats to loons off coastal Louisiana, tighter insights on loon vocalizations, a first look at adult survival of Pacific Loons, and nest selection, mercury exposure, and territory retention by Yellow-billed Loons—all new country.

Yet in my perspective the workshop last August offered something even more important. It rekindled the spirit and science of the erstwhile NALF in the 21st century, arising at new and more specific levels of understanding among a new generation of scientists and managers, still searching and questioning and sparring and doubting and finding agreement yet once again, and not only through publication but also by gathering together.

Statistical study and publication alone do not produce a complete science. It is the verbal sparring among a friendly mix of observers and scientists and thoughtful naturalists that inspires, creates, and responds to the new questions. In congregation lies the truly creative source of tomorrow's answers and, thereby, the inevitable questions that follow. NALF facilitated that through 3 decades in the last millennium and into this one. May we celebrate these efforts to rekindle and supplant it. And may it continue, for the loons' sakes and our own.

Finally, in association with Dave and Jim and Jay, I thank you all, readers and observers and participants alike, for your interest, your scientific and conservation work, and the human passion behind both.

Jeff Fair
 Lazy Mountain, Alaska
 May 2013

Jeff Fair began his loon work in 1978 on Lake Umbagog in New Hampshire and Maine. He directed the New Hampshire loon recovery project from 1981-1991 and NALF from 1981-1984, and later served on the boards of both. He has lived in Alaska for 19 years as a writer and a freelance field biologist focusing on both Common Loons from central Maine to Alaska and Yellow-billed Loons in Alaska's western Arctic and Canada.