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Diane Rice - diane.rice226@gmail.com

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Five Loons Rescued from Ice on Lake Sunapee

Call LPC if you see
loons in danger

Press release

On Tuesday, January 26, five iced-in loons were rescued on Lake Sunapee, about halfway between Loon Island Light and Blodgett's Landing. Loons can require close to a quarter mile of open water to take flight, but these loons were trapped in two very small patches of open water.

A group of three loons was originally spotted on January 24 when Jamie Hess and Lisa Putnam were out skating on the lake. The Loon Preservation Committee (LPC) was quickly alerted to the situation.

LPC Senior Biologist John Cooley, along with Jamie Hess, Lisa Putnam, Linda Howes, and Wendy Anderson, carefully traversed the frozen lake, pushing a small Jon-boat with other rescue equipment to the first hole. When they arrived and looked around, they happened to see two other loons trapped in another small hole nearby.

After watching the loons dive and resurface several times, teetering on the edge of the boat, and going for a brief swim in the frigid water, Cooley was able to capture them with a large net. Once the first three loons were safely onshore, Cooley and the rescue team headed back to the second hole to capture the other two loons. LSPA Executive Director June Fichter and LPC Volunteer/Outreach Coordinator Susie Burbidge provided support onshore.

After all five loons had been captured, they were transported to The Loon Center in Moultonborough for bloodwork and banding. Upon closer examination, LPC biologists found that four of the five adult loons were molting their flight feathers, a yearly process that normally takes place between January and April when the loons are on their ocean wintering grounds. This leaves them flightless for a few weeks, so the stranded loons would have not been able to take off even if there was more open water on Lake Sunapee.

One of the loons was previously banded in 1998 on Sand Pond in Marlow, which makes him at least 20 years old. All five loons were underweight, and the smallest one, presumably from interior Canada (where loons are smaller on average), had already completed its molt and had a brand new set of flight feathers.

After the four unbanded loons were banded, they were all transported to re-

habilitator Kappy Sprenger, who then relayed them to Avian Haven Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Freedom, Maine for further care.

Blood tests revealed that one of the adults had very high levels of lead in its bloodstream – more than three times the threshold for clinical lead poisoning. An x-ray showed a large lead sinker in the gastrointestinal tract.

Wildlife rehabilitators at Avian Haven attempted to remove the sinker by flushing it out of the bird's system, but this treatment was unsuccessful. Chelation therapy to absorb lead from the bloodstream might give this loon a slim chance of survival. Lead poisoning continues to be the leading cause of adult loon mortality in New Hampshire.

After an overnight stay in a pool at Avian Haven, three of the loons were released off the coast of Maine. Another loon will hopefully be released by the end of the week, but the fate of the lead-poisoned loon is still undetermined.

With the unusually warm weather we have had so far this winter and the fact that some loons may have molted their flight feathers already, LPC biologists are asking the public to keep an eye out for loons on the ice. If you see an iced-in loon, please call LPC at 476-5666. So far in 2016, LPC has rescued seven loons trapped in the ice, an unusually high total.

Loon migration is usually triggered by day length, so when a loon lingers on a lake longer than it should, there is often an underlying problem that has prevented it from leaving the lake in the first place. This was the case for all five loons rescued on Lake Sunapee.

A winter loon rescue can be hazardous work, and human safety is of utmost importance. LPC has a protocol in place to deal with these situations. In addition to the rescue suit and boat, Cooley was equipped with ice awls and an ice axe, flotation devices, a pole, and the net. Rescuers notified the local fire department before proceeding onto the ice, and there were people on shore in the event of an emergency. LPC credits the reporting of these loons by concerned members of the public with saving these birds.

The Loon Preservation Committee (Loon.org) monitors loons throughout the state as part of its mission to restore and maintain a healthy population of loons in New Hampshire; to monitor the health and productivity of loon populations as sentinels of environmental quality; and to promote a greater understanding of loons and the natural world.

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