



## Musing

### July 2019 - "The Loon Chick: A Story of Survival"

Jim Bakken

*Few things on lakes in the north woods are more enjoyable and peaceful than hearing the call of the loon and being able to observe the beautiful bird's many unique behaviors as we ply our wonderful area lakes. Loons are seemingly shy and private creatures, although at times they may seem not bothered by human activity. Loons have natural predators, including crows, ravens, gulls and raccoons that feed on the eggs, and eagles that often view the chicks as easy lunch. The birds are a mysterious sort and often the object of curiosity for humans. The temptation to observe from a close distance may result in disturbance of the loon; unfortunately, occasional harassment by unknowing folks is reported. Harassing the common loon carries a \$1,000 fine in Wisconsin. The best practice in viewing loons is to use the 200-foot rule, giving the creatures room to do their thing.*

*I am the Loon Ranger on Upper Eau Claire, observing and reporting loon activity to the [LoonWatch Program](#), for quite a number of years. Annually I report the number of nesting pairs, chicks hatched and "floater" loons on Upper. The following story describes a mid-July eagle attack on Upper Eau Claire Lake targeting a four-week-old chick; my niece, who was with me at the time of the attack, shared "It was just like watching Animal Kingdom on TV."*

#### The Heart-Stopping Event

On Saturday, July 20, I witnessed a heart-stopping event on Upper Eau Claire. We (my brother and his family) were out for a pontoon cruise and motored out to where the Upper Chick has been hanging out. We spent a few minutes watching the chick and adult leisurely swimming and diving. The chick is sprouting some wing feathers, it has a white belly, but mostly wears brownish "fuzz".



The chick and parent that survived the eagle attack.

After a few minutes we slowly motored away. When we were about 100 yards away, we heard the adult issue an alert call. We glanced back toward the loons and an eagle was overhead at a low altitude and dropping quickly! “Oh no, it’s going to get him (the chick)” my niece cried out!



*Eagle rapidly descending toward the loon chick.*

About that time, a second eagle appeared at a somewhat higher altitude, but it was also descending quickly. This did not look at all like it was going to end well. I quickly turned the pontoon back toward the loons and threw the throttle forward, full speed ahead hoping to intercept the eagles or at least frighten them away. As we raced back to the loons, my niece kept crying out “it’s going to get the chick, it’s going to get him!” The adult loon was in defense mode, raising a great ruckus, doing the penguin dance, thrashing its wings and issuing a shrill warning tremolo toward the eagle. As the first eagle approached, the chick suddenly dove beneath the water surface. About that time, we were still 100 feet away, the eagle went down for what appeared to be a quick meal. The eagle’s talons dipped into the water, but they came up empty-handed!

*The eagle came up empty-handed to our delight!*



The adrenaline was flowing by then and my heart was racing. Thankfully, we were close enough to help deter further eagle attacks; both eagles retreated to higher altitudes and left the area. We breathed a temporary sigh of relief!

### **Where is the Chick?**

We paused near the adult and shut down the motor; the adult had stopped its defensive efforts to fend off the eagle and was focused on locating its chick. The adult began to call out to the chick, but it was nowhere to be seen. We scanned the water surface, but no chick! I said, “it couldn’t stay

under water that long, could it?" We wondered if it had been injured! The adult kept looking around, calling to the chick with a gentle wail. It seemed like forever! The brown fuzzy chick finally surfaced a few yards away and we all let out a sigh of relief. The adult hurried over to the chick; we could almost hear the adult loon breathe a sigh of relief.



*A bit frisky, the chick was alive and well the next day.*

We all looked at each other and thought "what did we just witness?" It was surreal. However, in the end it couldn't have had a better outcome as the adult and chick were reunited. The adrenaline rush slowly was absorbed into our systems as we chatted about what we had just witnessed.

Oh my, the high stress life of a Loon Ranger!