

Species Status Assessment

Common Name:	Common Loon	Date Updated:	2025-10-02
Scientific Name:	<i>Gavia immer</i>	Updated By:	Tgh; WDS Section
Class:	Aves		
Family:	Gaviidae		

Species Synopsis

The common loon, *Gavia immer*, breeds on freshwater lakes and ponds in Canada and northern portions of the United States and overwinter along both coasts. The breeding population in New York is centered around the Adirondack region, with a small number of breeding records occurring in western and central parts of the state. Data from 2004-2023 seem to indicate a steady or increasing number of adult loons on breeding lakes, and a slight decline in nest productivity. While the total population has been increasing from historic lows in the 1970s-80s, common loons still face threats such as shoreline development, disturbances from recreational activities, nest flooding, and pollution.

I. Status

a. Current legal protected Status

- i. **Federal:** Not listed
- ii. **New York:** Special Concern

b. Natural Heritage Program

- i. **Global:** G5
- ii. **New York:** S4 **Tracked by NYNHP?** Yes

Other Ranks:

COSEWIC: Not listed in Canada
IUCN Red List: Least Concern
NYS 2025 SGCN Status: Species of Greatest Conservation Need
Northeast Regional SGCN: Not listed

Status Discussion:

Common loon is a common breeder in the Adirondacks and rare elsewhere in the state, though breeding was confirmed in Chautauqua, Schuyler, and Onondaga counties during the second

Breeding Bird Atlas (2000-05). Common loon is ranked as Secure in Ontario and Quebec and as Apparently Secure in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. In Vermont it is ranked as Vulnerable. In Massachusetts, the nonbreeding population is ranked Secure, while the breeding population is ranked as Imperiled. Connecticut ranks the breeding population of common loons within the state as Critically Imperiled

II. Abundance and Distribution Trends

Region	Present?	Abundance	Distribution	Time Frame	Listing status or S-Rank	SGCN?
North America	Yes	Increasing	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 trend for US		-
Northeastern US	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend		No
New York	Yes	Increasing	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 trend	SC; S4	Yes
Connecticut	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	S1B	No
Massachusetts	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend	SC; S2B, S5N	Yes
New Jersey	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	S4N	Yes
Pennsylvania	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	S4N, S3M	No
Vermont	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 not credible trend	S3B	Yes
Ontario	Yes	Declining	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 trend	S5	-
Quebec	Yes	Increasing	Unknown	BBS 1966-2022 trend	S5B	-

Column options

Present?: Yes; No; Unknown; No data; (blank) or Choose an Item

Abundance and Distribution: Declining; Increasing; Stable; Unknown; Extirpated; N/A; (blank) or Choose an item

SGCN?: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item

Monitoring in New York

Monitoring of common loons is conducted by various programs and volunteer efforts, primarily coordinated by the Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation (ACLC). In 2001 the ACLC began conducting an annual census of loons on 129 lakes in the Adirondacks. The total number of lakes surveyed each year varies, with a high of 278 lakes in 2023 (ACLC 2025a).

Trends Discussion

While data from the ACLC show a slight decline in overall nest productivity on a subset of surveyed lakes between 2004-2023, overall chick survival appears stable or slightly increasing (ACLC 2025b). Between 2001-2024, the total percentage of lakes with loons observed increased, while the percentage of lakes with no loons observed decreased (ACLC 2025a, ACLC 2005b). During the three New York Breeding Bird Atlases between 1985-2024, the percentage of survey blocks where loons were documented increased by 5.3% (accounting for varying number of total blocks included in each Atlas). Based on eBird data from 2011-2021, the wintering population of loons in New York is on a declining trend of -24.3% (Fink et al. 2023).

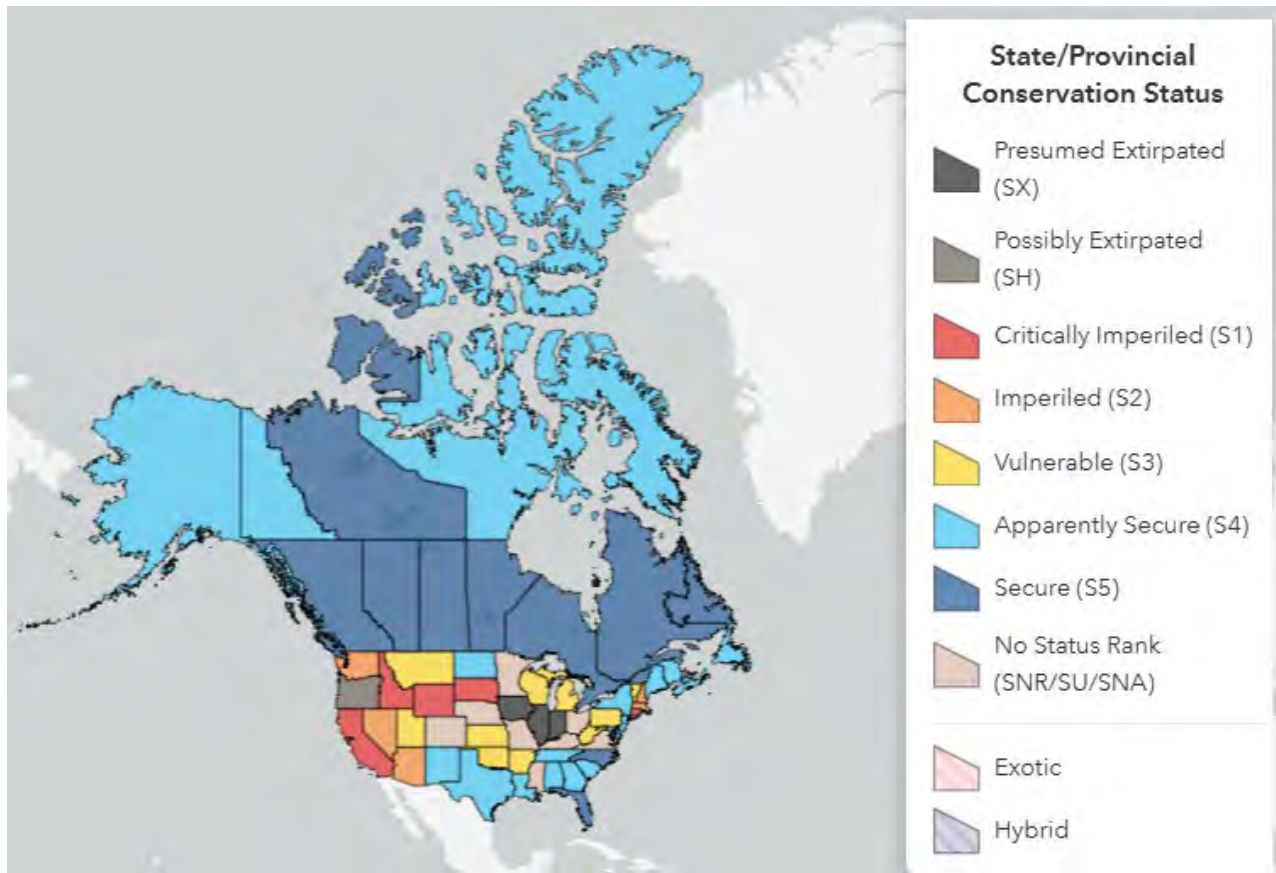
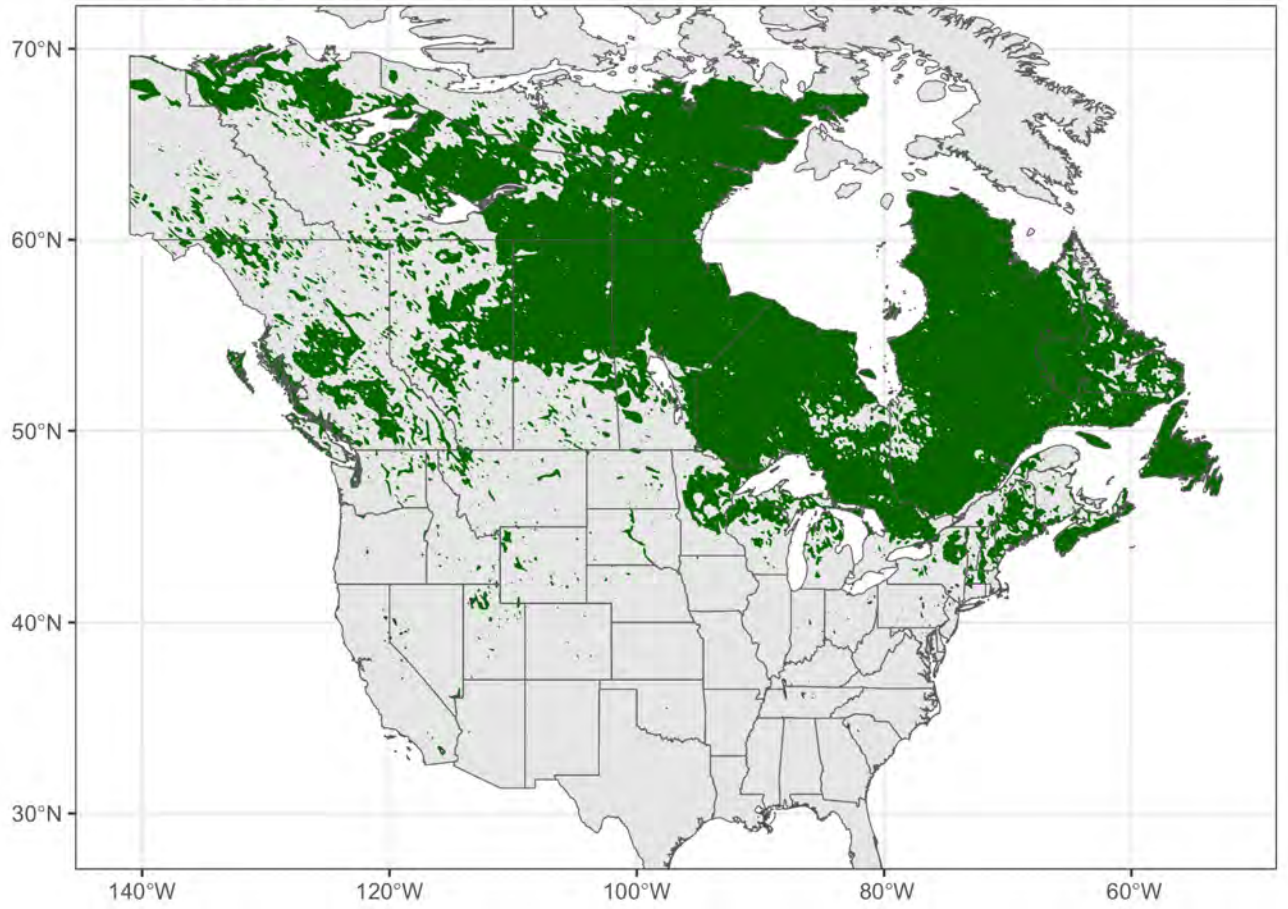


Figure 1. Conservation status of common loon in North America (NatureServe).

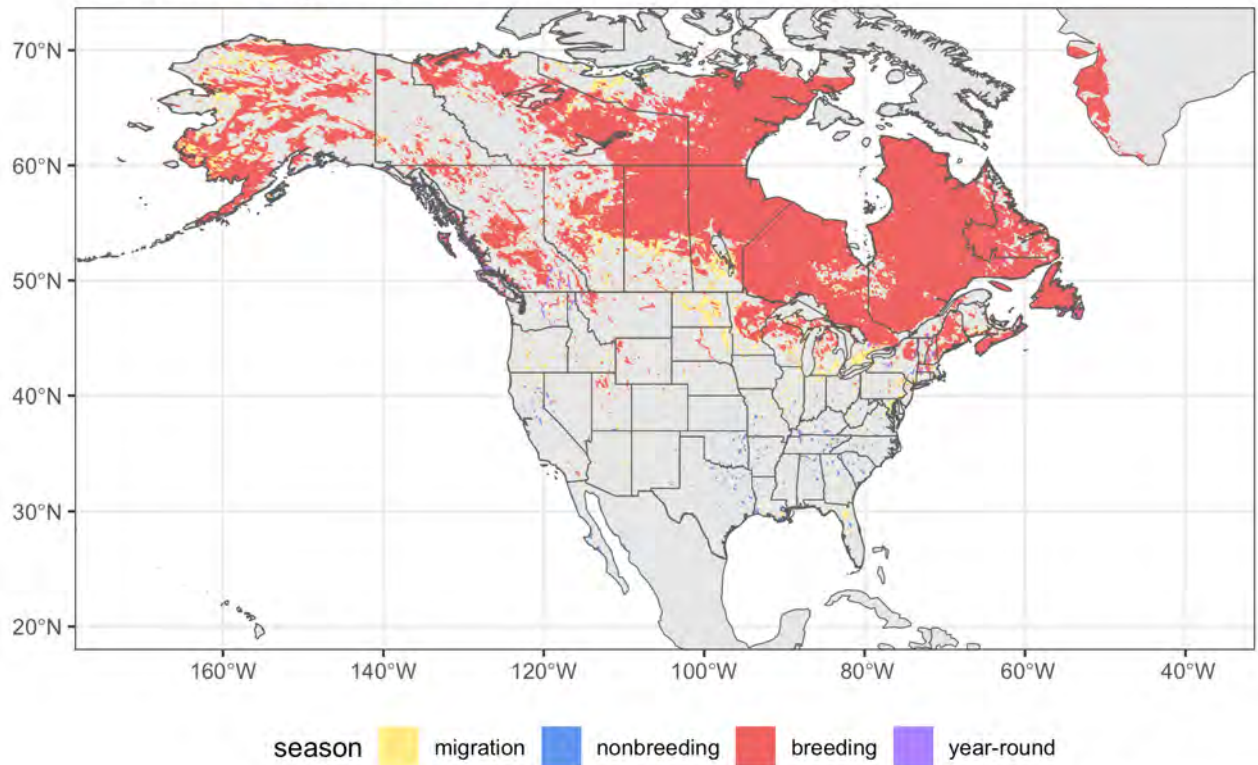
Breeding range map for Common Loon



Range map data from eBird Status and Trends, Data Version: 2022; Released: 2023

Figure 2. Breeding range of common loon (eBird 2024).

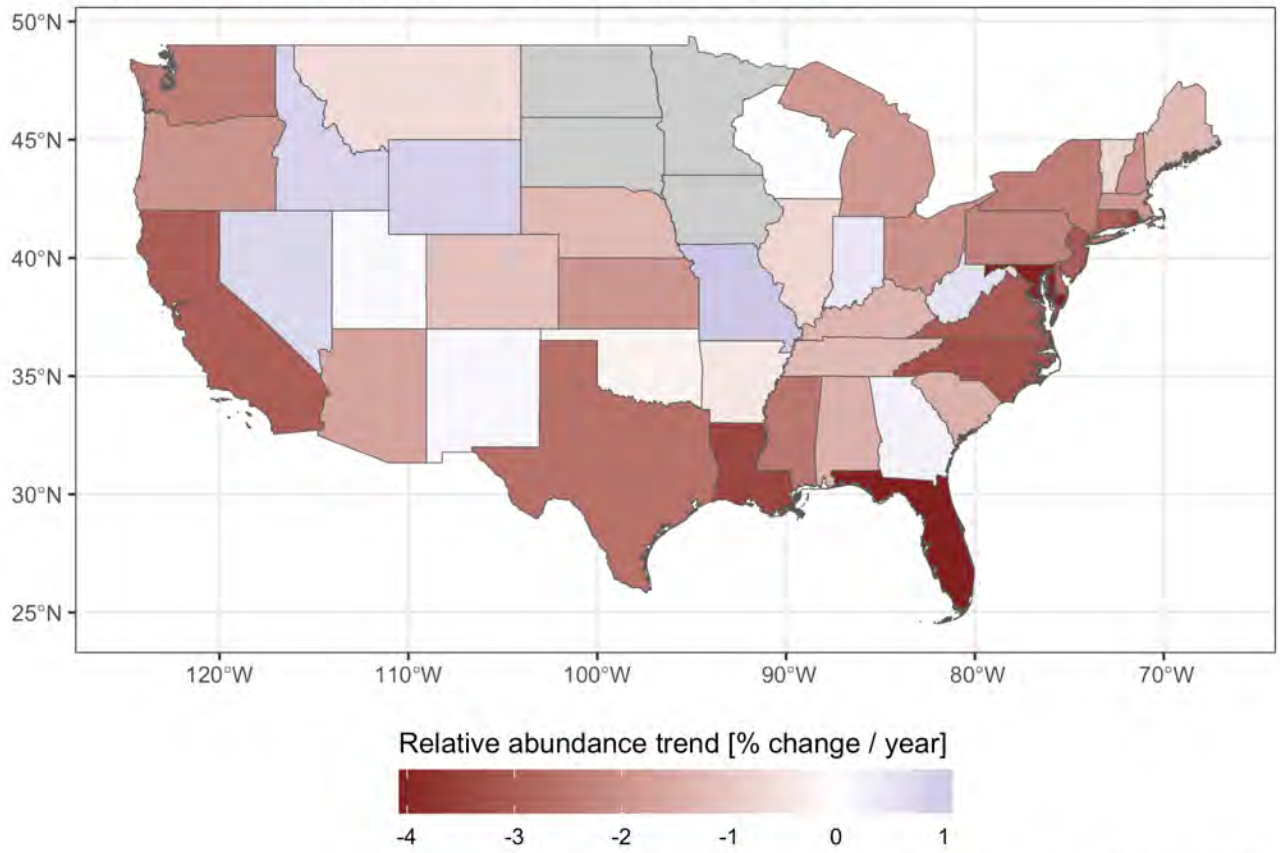
Year-round range map for Common Loon



Range map data from eBird Status and Trends, Data Version: 2022; Released: 2023

Figure 3. Full (year-round) range of common loon (eBird 2024).

Common Loon state-level breeding trends 2012-2022



Trend data from eBird Status and Trends, Data Version: 2022; Released: 2023

Figure 4. Trends, by state, for common loon (eBird 2024).

III. New York Rarity

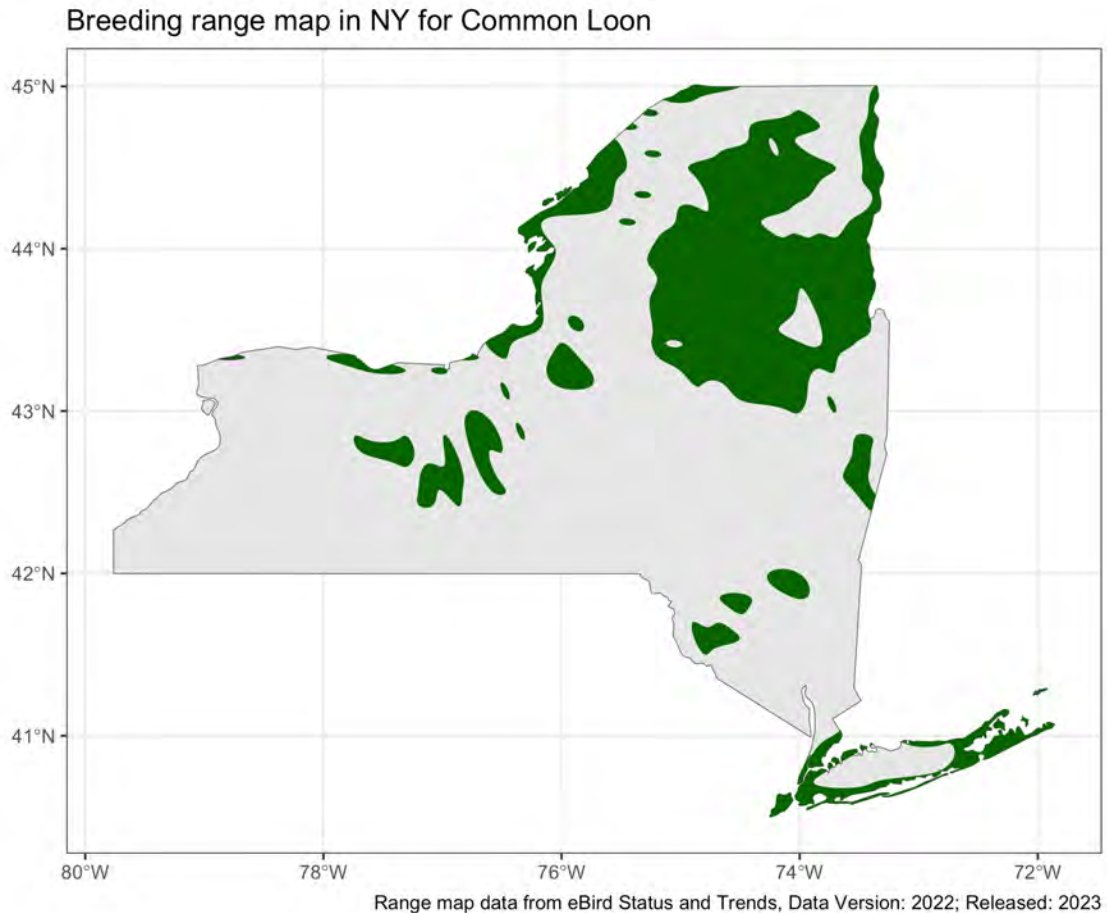


Figure 5. NYS breeding range for common loon (eBird 2024). NOTE: Locations marked within the Catskills and Long Island are not breeding areas. They are overwintering areas and were mapped due to nonbreeding individuals lingering in these areas into the summer.

Details of historic and current occurrence:

The first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) (1980-85) documented occupancy in 369 blocks, 6.9% of the survey blocks statewide (Andrle and Carroll 1988). The second BBA (2000-05) documented occupancy in 528 blocks, 9.9% of the survey blocks statewide (McGowan and Corwin 2008).

The third BBA (2020-25) is currently underway and utilizes a different number and layout of survey blocks across New York, making direct comparison with the first two Atlases difficult. There were 5,333 blocks in the first and second BBAs, and there are 5,710 blocks in the current BBA, of which 1,815 are considered priority blocks. To date, common loon has been documented in 515 priority blocks, 12.2% of all priority blocks statewide during the third BBA (NY BBA III Overview, 2024).

New York's Contribution to Species North American Range:

Based on eBird data, 0.26 percent of the population breeds in New York, while 2.94 percent of the non-breeding population occurs in New York. Among all states with breeding populations, New York ranks 6 of 13.

Percent of North American Range in NY	Classification of NY Range	Distance to core population, if not in NY
1-25%	-	-

Column options

Percent of North American Range in NY: 100% (endemic); 76-99%; 51-75%; 26-50% 1-25%; 0%; Choose an item

Classification of NY Range: Core; Peripheral; Disjunct; (blank) or Choose an item

IV. Primary Habitat or Community Type

NatureServe broad habitat types: Bog/fen, Riparian, HERBACEOUS WETLAND, Shallow water, Deep water, River mouth/tidal river, Bay/sound, Lagoon, BIG RIVER, Near shore

NY Natural Heritage Communities: Bog, lake/pond, Eutrophic dimictic lake, Meromictic lake, Mesotrophic dimictic lake, Oligotrophic dimictic lake, Oligotrophic pond, Summer-stratified monomictic lake, Winter-stratified monomictic lake

Habitat or Community Type Trend in New York

Habitat Specialist?	Indicator Species?	Habitat/ Community Trend	Time frame of Decline/ Increase
Unknown	Yes	Unknown	Unknown

Column options

Habitat Specialist and Indicator Species: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Habitat/Community Trend: Declining; Stable; Increasing; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Habitat Discussion:

Common loons breed on a wide variety of lakes and reservoirs in the Adirondacks ranging from oligotrophic (low-nutrient) to eutrophic (high-nutrient), small to large, shallow to deep, clear to turbid, and remote to heavily developed (Rimmer 1992). Breeding has been documented on lakes as small as 4 ha, but loons typically nest on lakes 20 ha or larger (McIntyre 1975). Lakes smaller than 80 ha often support only a single pair (McIntyre 1988). Common loons often breed on lakes that contain both shallow and deep water areas. Shallow areas are important for feeding and brood rearing, and deeper areas provide escape cover for incubating adults. Nests are often located as close as possible to deep water, on the edge of an island or low hummock, or on rocks, logs, or pieces of bog mat (McIntyre 1988). Loons are visual feeders, and water clarity is an important component of breeding habitat selection (McIntyre 1975, McIntyre 1988). Nonbreeding habitat is primarily seacoasts, bays, inlets, and estuaries, less frequently along lakes and rivers, and occasionally up to 100 km off the coast (AOU 1998).

Optimal nest sites, as measured by degree of success, include overhead cover to conceal eggs from predators, protection from wind and waves, good visibility by incubating adults, and a steep slope adjacent to the nest for adequate underwater approaches and exits (McIntyre 1975, 1983, 1988). The nest is a mound of plant matter screened by vegetation and placed near the water's

edge on islands, islets or promontories (del Hoyo et al. 1992, Snow and Perrins 1998). Brood-rearing areas are typically located in shallow coves of fairly uniform depth, sheltered from prevailing winds and wave action, and are independent of nest site location (McIntyre 1983, Strong 1985). Breeding adults usually feed outside of nursery areas (Strong 1985), occasionally outside of their territories (McIntyre 1983), and may visit nearby lakes for feeding (Miller and Dring 1988).

In winter and during migration, common loons use inland lakes and rivers and marine and estuarine coastal waters. Most nonbreeding subadults apparently remain in coastal areas during breeding season. Winter primarily in coastal marine habitats, including bays, coves, channels, inlets and other shallow areas (Bent 1919, McIntyre 1988, Palmer 1962). Some individuals overwinter on inland lakes and rivers, although this appears to be largely weather influenced (McIntyre 1988). During winter, the species occurs singly, in pairs or in small loose flocks in marine habitats, occasionally also forming large congregations of c.300 (Snow and Perrins 1998, del Hoyo et al 1992). While shallow, inshore waters appear to be utilized more frequently than deeper, offshore waters (McIntyre 1978, Daub 1989), some use continental shelf waters up to 100 m in depth and 100 km from land (Haney 1990). In the southeastern U.S. (between 29 degrees and 35 degrees North latitude), wintering loons were most common in waters up to 19 m deep but were rare or absent in highly turbid waters five to 15 km from shore. Loon distribution shifted farther offshore during midwinter to avoid increases in these turbid water areas (Haney 1990). Feeding typically occurs in water depths less than five meters, while maintenance activities (e.g., preening and drifting) take place in deeper water (McIntyre 1978, Daub 1989).

Its diet consists predominantly of fish as well as crustaceans, mollusks, aquatic insects, annelid worms, frogs, other amphibians and plant matter (e.g. Potamogeton spp., willow Salix spp. shoots, roots, seeds, moss and algae) (del Hoyo et al 1992). The nest is a mound of plant matter screened by vegetation and placed near the water's edge on islands, islets or promontories (del Hoyo et al 1992, Snow and Perrins 1998).

V. Species Demographics and Life History

Breeder in NY?	Non-breeder in NY?	Migratory Only?	Summer Resident?	Winter Resident?	Anadromous/Catadromous?
Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Column options

First 5 fields: Yes; No; Unknown; (blank) or Choose an item.

Anadromous/Catadromous: Anadromous; Catadromous; (blank) or Choose an item.

Species Demographics and Life History Discussion

(include information about species life span, reproductive longevity, reproductive capacity, age to maturity, and ability to disperse and colonize):

Common loons construct nests on the edge of waterbodies. They will also opportunistically use marshes, sedge mats, cranberry bogs, floating bogs, and the tops of logs or muskrat houses (Paruk et al. 2021). The common loon is a K-selected species, a long-lived species with a low reproductive rate. One brood is reared per year, with a usual clutch size of 2 eggs. Lakes smaller than 80 ha generally support only one breeding pair. Territory size is typically larger on

large lakes than on small lakes. Generally, loss of eggs to predators is not a primary cause of breeding failure (Johnsgard 1987).

The ecology of wintering loons is not well studied. McIntyre (1978) found that loons off the Virginia coast maintained individual feeding territories of four to eight ha during the day and rafted together at night. Activity patterns were significantly correlated with tidal changes. Maintenance behavior was greatest during the mid-period of tidal rise. Feeding activities peaked late in the flood tide and during the first half of the ebb tide.

VI. Threats

Threat Level 1	Threat Level 2	Threat Level 3	Spatial Extent	Severity	Immediacy	Trend	Certainty
1. Residential and Commercial	1.1 Housing & Urban Areas	Lakeshore development	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
6. Human Intrusions & Disturbance	6.1 Recreational Activities	6.1.4 Recreational boating	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
6. Human Intrusions & Disturbance	6.1 Recreational Activities	6.1.8 Wildlife observation/photography	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species	8.2 Problematic Native Plants & Animals	8.2.5 Increased predation by mesopredators	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
8. Invasive & Other Problematic Species	8.4 Pathogens	8.4.1 Bacterial pathogens (botulism)	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
9. Pollution	9.2 Industrial & Military Effluents	9.2.1 Oil spills	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
9. Pollution	9.2 Industrial & Military Effluents	9.2.5 Mercury	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
9. Pollution	9.4 Garbage & Solid Waste	9.4.2 Solid lead (lead fishing tackles and fishing line)	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.
11. Climate Change	11.4 Changes in Precipitation & Hydrological Regimes	11.4.4 Increase in fluctuations in precipitation regime (flooding of nest sites, or low water levels preventing nest site access)	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.	Choose an item.

Table 2. Threats to common loon

The number of territorial loons on a lake decreases as the amount of shoreline development increases (Stockwell and Jacobs 1993). In the Adirondack Park, more than 8,000 new houses were built between 1990 and 2000, primarily along roads and lakeshores (Bauer 2001). Recreation on lakes and associated pollution increases accordingly with development.

Disturbance from recreational activities that bring people close to loon nests, including jet skis, motorized boats, canoeing, and illegal camping may cause adult loons to be off the nest for an extended period, thus exposing eggs to predation or excessive cooling. Adult loons may abandon a nest if disturbed too frequently. Recreational activities that produce wakes can also cause flooding of nests. In one New Hampshire study, reproductive success was lower on a lake that allowed personal watercrafts than on a lake that banned them (Schoch 2002).

Lake acidification results in low fish populations. Ingestion of lead fishing tackle results in lead poisoning and death. The common loon has been used as an indicator species for mercury studies in the Adirondacks, which concluded, in part, that mercury is a primary stressor to loon populations, resulting in decreased productivity (Schoch and Jackson 2011). Wintering loons are susceptible to oil spills off the Atlantic Coast.

Loons are also impacted by diseases and pathogens. An outbreak of Type E botulism killed over 10,000 loons on Lake Ontario between 2000-2005. These were primarily migrating birds from the eastern Canadian Provinces and the upper Midwest. Adirondack loons appear to migrate directly to offshore wintering areas along the coast of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Jersey (Kenow et al. 2006). Highly pathogenic avian influenza was first detected in New York in 2022. As of March 2025, it has not been detected in more than two individual loons.

Are there regulatory mechanisms that protect the species or its habitat in New York?

Yes:



No:

Unknown:

If yes, describe mechanism and whether adequate to protect species/habitat:

This species is included in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (16 U.S.C. 703-712) and is protected as a native species under the NYS Environmental Conservation Law. It also receives additional protections as a species listed as Special Concern in New York State.

Describe knowledge of management/conservation actions that are needed for recovery/conservation, or to eliminate, minimize, or compensate for the identified threats:

Many conservation actions have been identified to ensure the health of common loons, including continuation of annual population surveys, removing lead from the aquatic environment, education of anglers to reduce use of lead sinkers and to avoid actions that result in fishing line entanglement with birds, protection of shorelines, and public education regarding recreational impacts to nesting productivity (Schoch 2002). Conservation actions are categorized in the table below.

Action Category	Action	Description
B.3 Outreach	B.3.1.4 Public outreach and information	Awareness through various methods of communication
C.6 Design and Plan Conservation	C.6.6.3 Tourism and recreation	Educational signage, programs etc. about impacts of boating, fishing tackle
C.8 Research and Monitoring	C.8.1.1.1 Characterization, demographic study, population, or inventory	Continue monitoring of breeding population
C.10 Institutional Development	C.10.3 Alliance and partnership development	Maintain and create new relationships across conservation partners for continued monitoring and protection of loons

Table 3. Recommended conservation actions for common loon.

VII. References

This SSA drew heavily from these resources:

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