

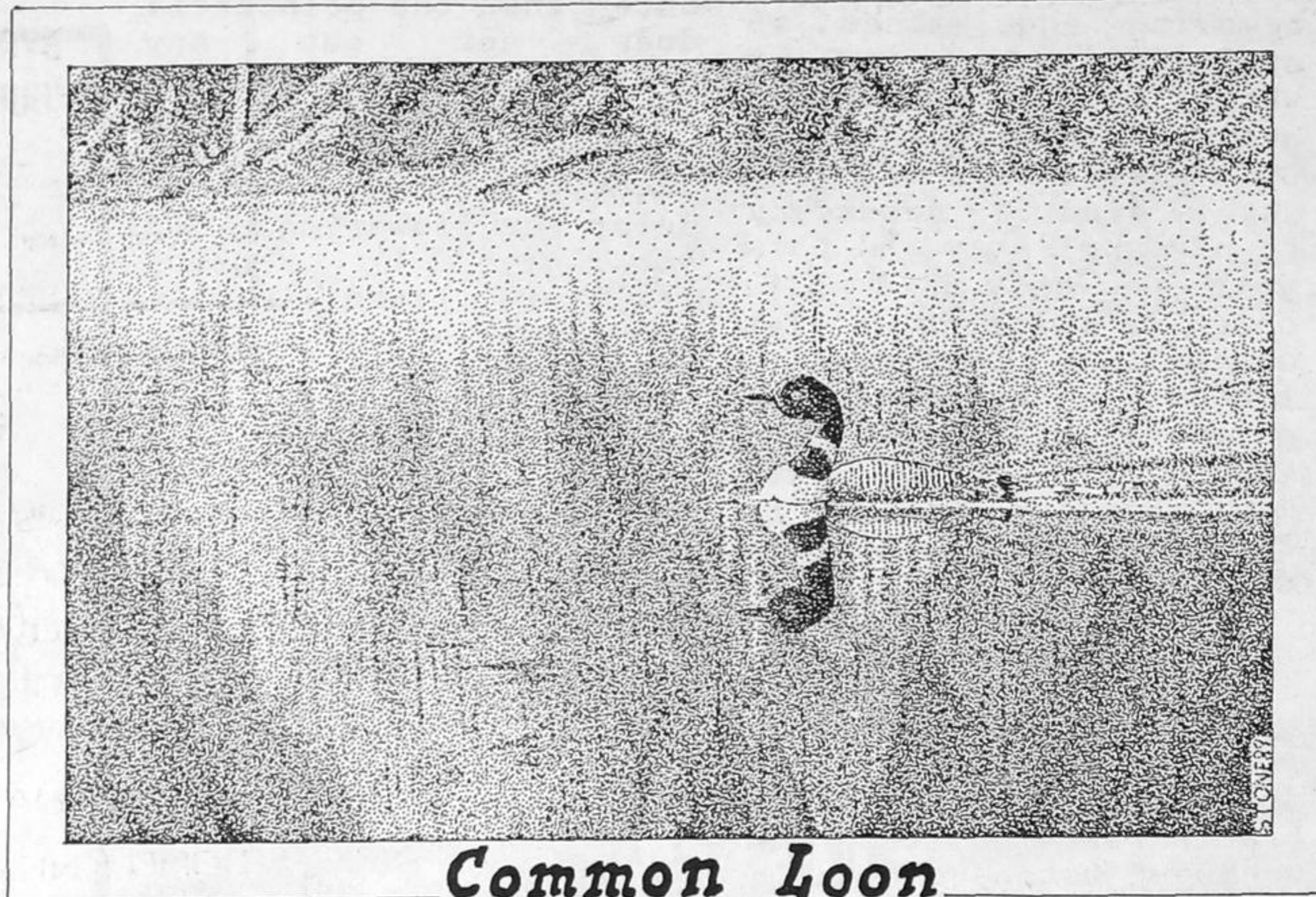
BIRDS OF A FEATHER
by Marg Hendrick

Have you ever considered how empty our lakes would seem without the presence of the Common Loon? Like so many other creatures we often take loons for granted; they're always there. Now, however, the Common Loon is living under increasing pressure and man is often to blame.

To expand on this, it might be of help to explain a little about this species which is so superbly designed for life in the water. One adaptation for its aquatic lifestyle is the placement of its "strong propulsive feet" which are positioned well back on the loon's body. This specialization is a great boon when the bird is operating in the water, but a terrible handicap to it on land. There, it is unable to walk, but must hump itself along rather like a seal, sometimes using its wings to force itself ahead. Being unable to stand or walk properly makes it impossible for the bird to fly from land, and so, to make life easier, it builds its nest close to the water. Often a small wooded island is chosen as the nest site, and the nest is placed close to the edge. Usually loons do not use much nesting material before laying the eggs but continue adding twigs, rushes, etc. as time goes by.

Now for the problems. Power boats, roaring by these low-lying nests, often flood them or wash them away with their excessive wake. Another hazard comes when we adjust the water levels of our lakes. This sometimes brings about the "drowning" of nests, or at the other extreme, leaves some too high and dry for the birds to manoeuvre in and out of the water.

There are more problems for loons: many get tangled up in abandoned fishing lines or even swallow hooks; others swallow lead sinkers or shot and are thereby poisoned; some are shot by careless or uncaring hunters, and nests are disturbed by people who do not realize the harm they can cause. Finally, there are people who "get their kicks" from intentionally harrasing



Common Loon

these beautiful creatures, thereby stressing a species that already has much against it. If we want to continue to enjoy the presence of loons in our lakes, we would do well to do all we can to protect them and educate others to do the same. Then perhaps not only we, but future generations will be able to thrill to the haunting and eerie calls of the Common Loon.

Now for a happy loon story! Bob Wanless, whose home overlooks Sand Lake, has come to appreciate the presence of loons near his home. Realizing some of the problems that this species faces, and knowing that these birds will accept artificial islands for nesting purposes, he decided to construct one. (Bear in mind that a "floating island" will rise and fall with the water level.)

Bob obtained 4 cedar logs, each approximately 8 ft. long, and from these he constructed a six ft. square "island". He covered the square with plastic-covered fence mesh. Then he covered the mesh with sod and included a small pine tree or two as part of the vegetation. He anchored his island in a quiet bay and kept watch. Almost immediately, a pair of loons showed interest, and fairly soon afterwards the loons were nesting. Bob and his wife Jacquie, watched through their telescope and saw the sitting loon stripping the pine

trees to form the nest.

Eventually, the usual two eggs were laid. From time to time Bob would ask fishermen and boaters to give the loons a chance to nest without disturbance; some people were co-operative - others were not.

After about a month, one egg hatched and Bob and Jacquie were able to watch the downy chick swim with its parents. The second egg never hatched, but Bob has the satisfaction of knowing that there is at least one more loon on Sand Lake because of his efforts.

A sequel to the above story. In a previous column I mentioned a pale Mallard that was courted by a normal coloured drake. In September she arrived at Bob's artificial island and for some time the adult appeared to be sitting on the remaining loon egg! This state of affairs did not last long, though at the time of writing the ducks are still hanging around "Loon Island".

Great Horned Owls have been relatively quiet throughout the summer but by August Winona Barker noticed that "hers" had become more vocal again.

Gladys Burt still has Northern Cardinals eating at her feeder and there are young birds among them. If there are any more lucky people who have cardinals present I would appreciate hearing from them.

Carlton Palmer phoned to ask when he should take his

hummingbird feeder down, and suggested I should publish my reply. Apparently there have been some suggestions that, by leaving hummingbird feeders up too long, we hold the birds back from their migration. NOT TRUE say the experts. "Healthy birds will leave when their biological clocks tell them to do so." (Pat Murphy in "Birdwatchers' Digest".) "An abundant food supply has no bearing on (hummingbirds') urge to migrate." (Hummingbird bander, Marguerite Baumgartner.) "When birds are ready for migration, all the food in the world won't keep them." (Sally Spofford, biologist and bird bander.) In fact, should your feeder be up late, a belated hummingbird might be helped at a time when natural food is hard to find, and so be able to continue its migration.

Leorene Hayes watched as a Ruby-throated Hummingbird deliberately flew through the hose spray then sat on the clothesline preening itself. She also enjoyed seeing 4 Eastern Bluebirds as they bathed in her birdbath.

George Antoine was still seeing the Bald Eagle at South Lake as late as September 10 and Bill Cutfield still observed the Red-throated Loon at Red Horse Lake well into September.


Rene Waterfield saw a Brown Thrasher in her yard at her new home in Elgin. She also saw Purple Finches, American Goldfinches and a Black-and-White Warbler. The warblers have been migrating south, and I have seen about 16 different kinds bathing in the runway of our garden pond.

It is time to think about getting your feeders up. If by chance you are interested in participating in FeederWatch, a study whereby people provide information on birds at their feeder, give me a call to get more information. In spite of the fact that it costs money to participate (to help defray forms and publishing expenses), a number of people from this area enjoy participating. In any case, do phone me at 359-5178 with your sightings and, until next month,
GOOD BIRDING!

See loon nests on opposite page

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