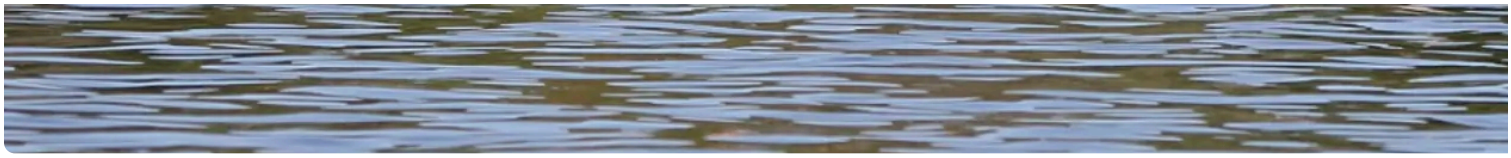
October 22, 2026

New Common Loon research uncovers a widespread decline and calls for action

The unprecedented international effort to understand and reverse declines in one of North America's most iconic waterbirds.





10-minute read

By Dr. Doug Tozer, Director, Waterbirds & Wetlands; Dr. Matthew Fuirst, Research Ecolo
Manager; and Kathy Jones, Volunteer Manager

Anyone who spends summer days on northern lakes is familiar with the beautiful and
Loons. Watching or listening to these iconic waterbirds is a cherished part of quality ti
outdoor enthusiasts. However, the famous melancholic wail of the Common Loon mig
Unfortunately, populations of this immensely popular species are now declining acros
revealing study by Birds Canada and numerous collaborators used data collected by t
volunteers to shed light on the outlook for Common Loons. Despite an uncertain futur
hope: there are actions we can all take now to help Common Loons that we know are
and our collaborators are working hard to identify other actions to help curb populatio

What we know

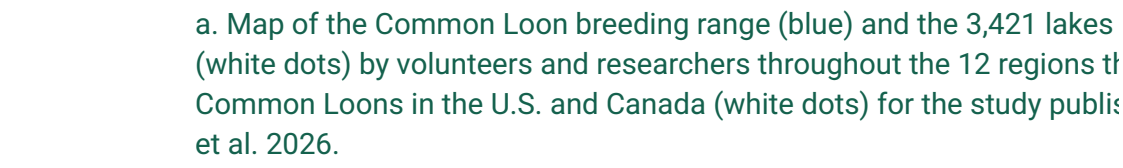
Data collected by thousands of volunteers in Birds Canada's extremely popular **Canadi**
4,000 volunteers have participated to date!) show that Common Loons have raised fe
past several decades (**a**, **b**). In addition, data from the **Breeding Bird Survey**, convenie
Common Loon in The State of Canada's Birds (a partnership project between Birds Ca
Climate Change Canada), showed that the number of adult Common Loons has decre
throughout most regions of southern Canada. Declines in **chick production and adults**
parts of the U.S.

Canada holds a great responsibility for the Common Loon, seeing as 94% of the world
reside in Canada. So, to figure out why Common Loons are declining, and what can be
co-founded the Loon and Diver Research Working Group in 2021. This international ne
researchers across U.S. and Canada are working to identify the factors responsible fo
populations. The group has considered dozens of factors, including human disturbanc
competition with other bird species, pollution, and disease. The current hypothesis fav
declines are being caused by decreasing lake water clarity. As extreme precipitation e
to climate change, more sediment and organic matter washes into lakes making the w
difficult for diving loons to see their underwater prey. The idea is that murkier water ov
loons have a harder time finding and catching fish to feed to their chicks, and as a resu
time. Plus, the **chicks that do survive end up in poorer condition** (lower mass) becaus
their parents, which means they have a lower chance of surviving through to adulthoo

In 2024 scientists from Chapman University, California, revealed that **decreases in wat**
decades on Common Loon nesting lakes in northern Wisconsin appeared to be respo
and adults observed in the region over the same time period.

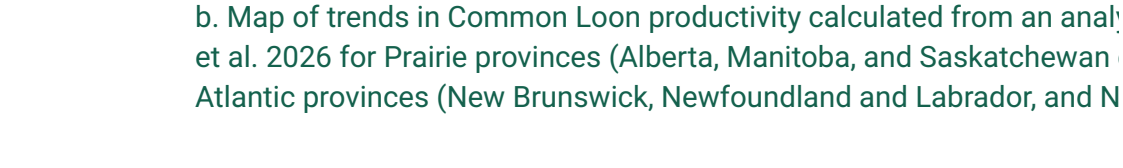
New science and what it tells us

The next piece in the loon puzzle was to establish if, and by how much, Common Loon decreased throughout the species' North American range. We knew that chick product some regions, but we didn't have a clear picture of whether these patterns extend thro the Common Loon breeding range. Knowing this information and bringing it all togethe pinpoint the cause or causes behind the declines—an important step to develop soluti them. So, Birds Canada, in partnership with numerous collaborators, spearheaded a la of patterns and trends in Common Loon chick production throughout most of the spec North America. Our new **groundbreaking study** was based on data from 45,000 Comm spanning 49 years (1975–2023) on 3,400 lakes in 9 Canadian provinces and 7 U.S. sta Lakes Loon Survey data collected by Birds Canada volunteers, nine collaborating orga contributed large, long-term datasets, many of them also collected by volunteers, mak Loon analysis of its kind ever undertaken (please see list of contributing organizations



a. Map of the Common Loon breeding range (blue) and the 3,421 lakes
(white dots) by volunteers and researchers throughout the 12 regions th
Common Loons in the U.S. and Canada (white dots) for the study publis
et al. 2026.

The results of the study are sobering. Common Loon chick production declined by a to
the decades in 10 out of the 12 regions analyzed, with the total decline ranging from 1
depending on the region and time period. Long-term declines were present in British C
Ontario, the Atlantic provinces, Washington, Wisconsin, New York, Vermont, New Hamp
Only in Québec and Maine was chick production relatively stable or slightly increasing.
chick production has decreased substantially over the past several decades throughou
portions of the Common Loon's breeding range.



b. Map of trends in Common Loon productivity calculated from an analy
et al. 2026 for Prairie provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan
Atlantic provinces (New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and N

combined), British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Maine, New York, New H
Vermont, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Washington. Trend values are
steep declines (-2.5 to -1.5% per year), medium decline (-1.5 to -1.0% pe
decline (-1.0 to -0.5% per year), weak decline or near stable (-0.5 to 0.0%
stable or increasing (0.0 to 0.5% per year).

Next steps

With the full picture across most of the breeding range now in hand, it is an opportune
behind the declines. So, let's go back to what is already known: decreasing water clarit
declines, at least in Wisconsin. Fortunately, by using data derived from satellite image
can be calculated for thousands of lakes over many different years, which can then be
production on the same lakes in the same years. Birds Canada is now investigating wh
chick production can be explained by changes in lake water clarity across the southern
breeding range. This follow-up study will help determine if the link between chick prod
extends throughout most of the breeding range, rather than only within northern Wisco
identifying widespread causes of Common Loon decline we hope to identify and prom
will stabilize or increase Common Loon populations throughout the species' breeding

In the meantime, despite all the negative data, all is not lost: some lakes still have high
one reason for this is the care and management local volunteers provide to Common L
area—so thank you very much for your loon conservation efforts. Plus, there are actior
Common Loons.

How you can help

Donate to Birds Canada **here**, so we can make even more progress on conserving Common Loons

Participate in Birds Canada's **Canadian Lakes Loons Survey**, or any of the Common Loon monitoring programs in the U.S. (please see list of contributing organizations with potential opportunities below)

Use non-toxic lead-free fishing tackle; all it takes is one sinker or jig to kill an adult loon, and ingestion of toxic tackle is the leading cause of death in adult Common Loons

Dispose of fishing line and other plastics responsibly; many loons become fatally entangled in line and other debris left in lakes

Slow down and steer clear of loons while you're out on the water; loons

may not be able to escape your path and if you separate adults from their chicks, they can't protect them from predators

Visit the **Canadian Lakes Loon Survey project resources page on NatureCounts** for more ways to help loons

Your voice makes a difference, so please speak up and send a powerful message to your community and network for conserving Common Loons and their habitats

Learn more in our episode of the Warblers



A big thank you

We simply could not have accomplished this without the valued effort of thousands of you very much to each of you for your dedicated support of, and participation in, the C Breeding Bird Survey, and the many other Common Loon monitoring and conservation data to our study. We're also extremely grateful to 20 wonderful co-authors who worke resounding success, as well as for coming together to deliver a strong unified stateme Loons. Birds Canada's Canadian Lakes Loon Survey is delivered in partnership with **Qu** are very grateful. Birds Canada's loon science and conservation work has also benefite support, for which the following have been essential: Hodgson Family Foundation; Nat Conservation Foundation; and private donors.

Contributing organizations

- **Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation**
- **Biodiversity Research Institute**
- **Loon Preservation Committee**

Maine Audubon

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (“MassWildlife”)

The Loon Project, Chapman University

Vermont Center for Ecostudies

Director, Waterbirds and Wetlands

Dr. Doug Tozer

I’ve been hooked on birds ever since I can remember. For example, as a kid I got (a l
went on holidays to Disney World, because it meant I missed Canada Jay nest-findir
research project in Algonquin Park. Naturally, my academic and professional career
workable conservation solutions for birds, and raising awareness of the importance
I work on waterbirds and wetlands by directing the Great Lakes Marsh Monitoring Pr
Loon Survey, and Long Point Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Program.

Research Ecologist and Observatory Manager

Matthew Fuirst, Ph.D.

I've been drawn to wildlife biology since I was a kid spending hours investigating ins
reading about birds and mammals. It was not until my undergraduate career (with th
that I became hooked on birding and field ornithology. I have broad interests in unde
and movement ecology of wild animals, with particular research strengths in spatial
monitoring and conservation, behavioural ecology, and molecular analyses. I receive
Brook University (in New York), where I studied the foraging and microbial ecology o
awarded a Ph.D. from the University of Guelph where my studies examined the role
dynamics of adult and juvenile Canada Jays in Algonquin Park. Currently, I am respo
Thunder Cape bird observatories, and aspects of the Canadian Migration Monitoring
data from the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey to understand survivorship and contami

Volunteer Manager and Biologist, Ontario Programs, Canadian Lakes Loon Survey &
Monitoring Program

Kathy Jones

I am an avid supporter of conservation, habitat stewardship, and biodiversity, in the
community actions, and that each individual can make a difference. I spent my childc
next to the Big Creek National Wildlife Area. There I formed a great love for boating,
things aquatic. I hold an H.B.Sc. in Wildlife Ecology and Environmental Studies from
M.Sc.F in Wildlife Management from Lakehead University and Volunteer Manageme
Humber College. Past work in tourism, retail, raptor and duck research and data mar
experience collaborating with Citizen Scientists has led me to my present job. My th
adult children have taught me that yes, your beliefs can be instilled in the next gener
for our future.

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