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LOONLINE

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Can "jetskis" and loons co-exist?

The Canadian Lake Loon Survey (CLLS) began 15 years ago, in part, to assess threats to loons resulting from human activities. Comments from many surveyors over the past couple of years have revealed growing concerns about a new potential threat to loons – the increasingly popular personal motorized watercraft, also known by their trade name as "Jetskis" or, generically, as PWCs.

Jetskis have the potential to harm loons in several ways. On many lakes, extensive human use of small islands has increasingly driven loons to nest in quiet, shallow bays and marshes – areas which formerly excluded motorboats. Loons adapt as much as possible to human presence, and can even do so quite well, providing that the level of disturbance is reasonable. But now even these quiet backwaters are being invaded by high-speed jetskis. Jetskis have no propellers to get tangled in weeds and they float high in the water, so they can travel freely in these shallow bays.

The presence of a jetski can easily force a loon off its nest, leaving the eggs exposed to predation and the elements. Moreover, the wake from jetskis can wash eggs out of low-lying nests at the water's edge. Loon chicks are not safe either.

Accidental deaths of baby loons can and do occur. Quite unlike adult loons, downy loon chicks, which are not very visible to begin with, are very buoyant, cannot dive well and cannot get out of the way of fast-moving watercraft like jetskis. Not only can chicks be run over, but the too-close presence of a careless boater near a loon family can impede the parental care and feeding of chicks. Repeated or prolonged interruptions can have dire consequences for chicks already stressed by scarce food resources.

Anecdotal accounts of loons being disturbed or harassed make it clear that jetskis are having an effect on loons on some lakes. However, it is quite a different thing to determine whether there is a measurable effect at a population level. To do this, we need to be able to determine whether loon reproductive success differs on lakes with and without jetski activity. This is why we began specifically asking whether CLLS volunteers had observed jetskis on their lakes in 1996. If we are certain of which lakes have jetskis and which lakes don't, we can then make useful comparisons between them and see if jetskis are having a significant, measurable effect on loon reproductive success.

Once we know the extent of the problem, we can begin to look for cooperative solutions that leave both jetskiers and loons happy. In the meantime, perhaps we can help jetski enthusiasts and/or manufacturers come up with an environmental code of ethics.