

---

# Common Loon

## *Gavia immer*

---

Aves — Ciconiiformes — Gaviidae

### CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide:	Secure (G5)
Statewide:	Critically imperiled breeding/Imperiled nonbreeding (S1B,S2N)
ESA:	No status
USFS:	Region 1: Sensitive; Region 4: Sensitive
BLM:	No status
IDFG:	Protected nongame

### BASIS FOR INCLUSION

Low breeding population in Idaho; regional threats.

### TAXONOMY

The common loon is a large loon with a length of 66–91 cm (26–36 in) and a mass of 2.5–6.1 kg (5.5–13.4 lb). The common loon can be distinguished from the Pacific loon by its larger size and distinct breeding plumage pattern and from the yellow-billed loon by a black bill and more subtle plumage differences (McIntyre and Barr 1997).

### DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The common loon breeds from north–central Alaska, across most of Canada, west to Newfoundland (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Southern breeding range extends from south–east Maine, west to Minnesota, northwest Wyoming, northwest Montana, and northwest Washington. Most birds winter along coasts, and in coastal waters. In early winter, birds are found in many inland lakes, rivers, and large reservoirs. The population size of this species in North America is unknown, although it is estimated that 1,320 breeding adults are in the Great Basin and Northern Rocky Mountains (Ivey and Herziger 2005). Despite major attempts to locate common loon nests in Idaho, nesting birds have never been confirmed except for Indian Lake in Teton County, which lies mostly in Wyoming (Fitch and Trost 1985). Birds have been spotted in breeding plumage on 13 lakes in northern and southeastern Idaho during the breeding season. In the northern Idaho Panhandle, common loons with flightless chicks have been reported in Bonner County on the northern end of Priest Lake, Upper Priest Lake, and the Clark Fork Delta of Pend Oreille Lake (Taylor 2001; J. M. Soules, IDFG, pers. obs.). Wintering birds are seen on unfrozen major lakes, rivers, and reservoirs, in northern and southwestern Idaho.

### POPULATION TREND

Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data suggests a recent (1980–2004) statistically significant increase) in the U.S. (+2.4% per year) and western BBS region (+1.9% per year; Sauer et al. 2005), after a decline in the U.S. in the early– to mid–twentieth century (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Widespread shooting of loons, sparked by public belief that game fish populations were destroyed by loons, contributed to the steep decline in the early

twentieth century (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Trend data for Idaho is not available, likely because of low detection rates along BBS routes.

### **HABITAT AND ECOLOGY**

Common loons breed in clear, oligotrophic (with fish) lakes with forested, tundra, or rocky shorelines, bays, islands, and floating bogs (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Lakes are usually larger than nine hectares (22 ac) in size, below 1,800 m (5,905 ft), with adequate fish prey, nesting and nursery habitat. Nest sites are selected that provide shelter from wind, cover, view of open water, and near a drop-off steep enough for underwater approach. Islands, floating bogs, marshes, tops of muskrat houses, logs, and artificial nest platforms are utilized for nesting sites. Stable, non-floating, nest-sites are susceptible to flooding and egg loss. Clutch size is normally two eggs. Successful nests are reused from year to year while unsuccessful nests are temporarily abandoned for alternate sites. Chicks usually leave the nest within a day of hatching and remain with their parents until mid-September to mid-November. New chicks are highly dependent on their parents to lead them to a safe nursery area where shallow water and emergent vegetation protects them from waves, wind, and predators (McIntyre and Barr 1997).

### **ISSUES**

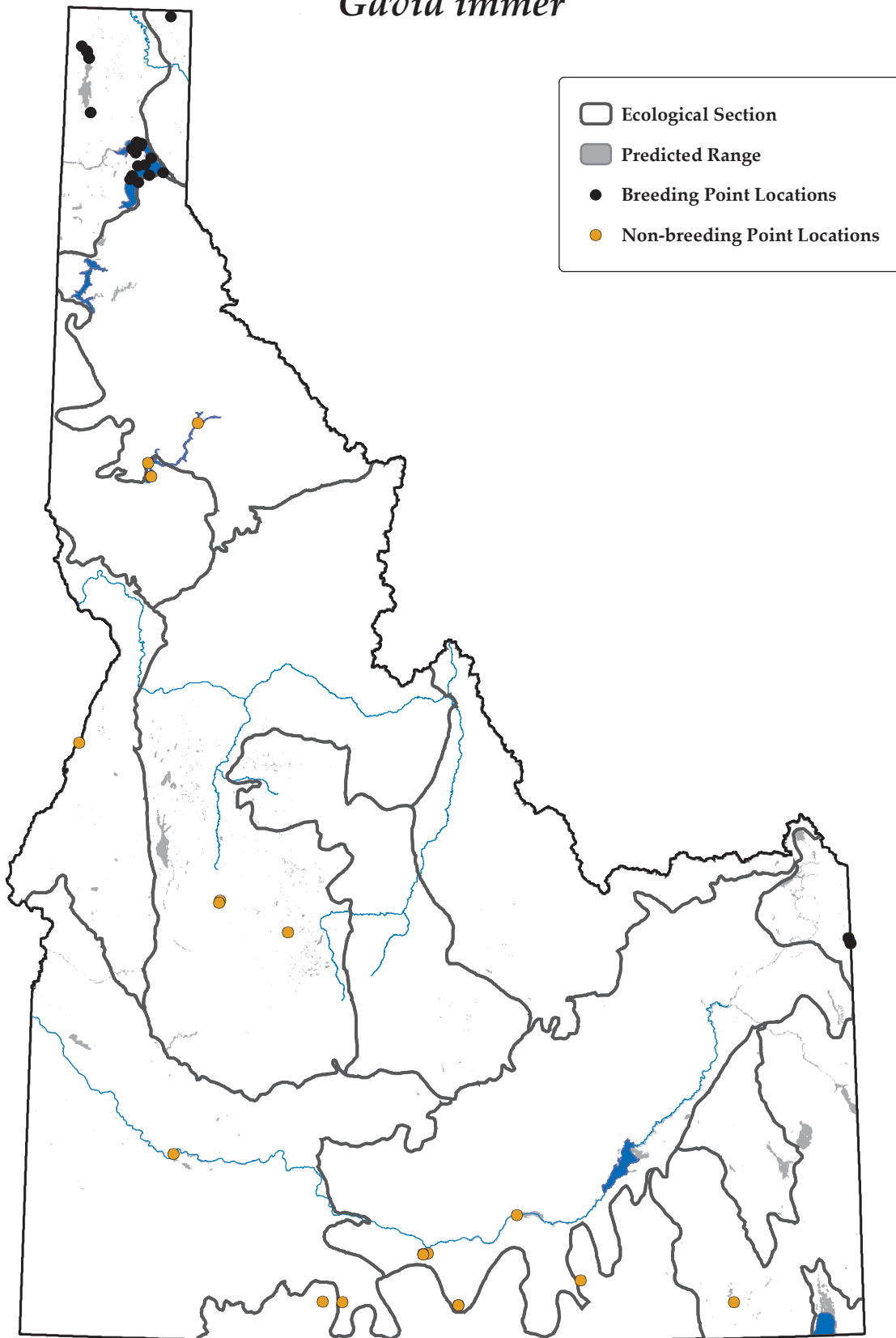
Shooting of loons was more common in the early 1900s but still occurs in large numbers (4600/yr) by native people in Canada. Effects of heavy metals, such as mercury, may increase mortality rates on both wintering and breeding grounds and negatively affect breeding success (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Lead poisoning from lead sinkers is also a concern although birds found dead with lead poisoning usually suffered from elevated mercury levels or some other affliction. Underwater fish traps, gill nets, oil spills, and water level instability are all significant threats to loon populations (McIntyre and Barr 1997). Degradation of habitat through shoreline development, campsites, human recreational use of nesting and nursery sites may force loons into marginal, less protected nesting sites. Chicks are more susceptible to predation when forced to separate from their parents by boats, jet skis, or any human intrusion; chicks are also killed by direct impact from outboard propellers and, more often, jet skis (McIntyre and Barr 1997).

### **RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

Breeding conservation programs, run mostly by dedicated volunteers, have been successfully established in many northern states (McIntyre and Barr 1997). These programs have been extremely successful in protecting nesting loons and their habitat and raising public awareness of loon conservation. Artificial nesting platforms were recently placed in Upper Priest, Priest, Pend Oreille, and Coeur d'Alene Lakes in northern Idaho as part of the Idaho Bird Inventory and Survey (IBIS) program. While none have been used to date, efforts are being made to monitor the loons during the breeding and non-breeding season. Increased study into the toxic sensitivity of loons is needed. Public education and cooperation has been attributed to reversal of population decline and should be expanded in Idaho (J. M. Soules, IDFG, pers. comm.).

# Common Loon

*Gavia immer*



12 July 2005

Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center, Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Predicted range is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationship Model A GAP Analysis of Idaho: Final Report (Scott et al. 2002). Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, University of Idaho.

