Loon Nesting Rafts

While you are boating on the lake this spring and summer near sheltered areas, you may notice a floating mass with a cedar base and a mass of grasses and compost on top. It is likely not a part of someone’s missing dock (but this year, maybe it could be!). Most likely it is a loon nesting raft which has been designed and built to help loons meet the challenges during their vulnerable nesting period.

Loons usually return to the lake as soon the ice is out. The male locates a suitable nesting site in shallow, sheltered areas of the lake. Typically, only one or two eggs are laid in the nest but occasionally there are three. Both parents share the incubation with hatching taking place within thirty days. It is within this period where the loss is potentially the greatest with egg predators, high winds or high water levels taking their toll. If there is too much disturbance around the nesting area due to boat traffic or nearby construction, the adults may abandon the nest. Upon hatching, the chicks leave the nest within a day or two, spend a good deal of time on their parent’s backs. For the first eight weeks are fed by their parents before being left to their own devices. If they were lucky enough to survive natural predators including large fish, the next hazard they face is boat props during the busy summer season. If boats get too close, adults will try to fend them off but will eventually dive while the chicks are not as adept. This leaves the chicks prone to the risk of dying from hyperthermia as the adults are not there to carry them out of the water and on their backs. So please keep a safe distance when you see any loons as their chicks are nearby.

While loons are agile swimmers and divers, they are relatively awkward on foot. As a result, they tend to nest in sheltered areas near the shoreline, where they can more readily access the nest from the water. Natural loon nests are vulnerable to unstable or high water levels that can submerge nests leaving the eggs inaccessible to the adults. Nests that float can rise and fall with water levels whether that level has been created by nature in the form of high levels of precipitation or man-made in the form of wakes from boats etc. Nest rafts can also provide more options to adult loons if they are displaced by shoreline development or increased boat traffic in formerly sheltered natural sites. They can also provide safer sites for nesting against natural predators like otters and more likely racoons whose populations have increased along with the availability of human refuse.

Dwayne Struthers is a volunteer board member of the Charleston Lake Association who does several loon surveys each year, noting the number of adults and chicks on the lake noting the siting locations. Last year we had approximately thirty adults and six surviving chicks. Dwayne and Garnet Baker have been building loon rafts for our lake for several years now. There are five on the lake currently. The loon rafts they build are made of three rows of natural 4X4 yellow cedar lumber, connected like a mini log structure. Between the first and second layers, they place wire mesh to contain sheets of foam for flotation. On the top side, they place a layer of sods and compost on which the loons create their nest. Loosely anchored, these nests can withstand unstable water levels and a certain amount of boat wake.

If you happen to notice one of these loon rafts as you are boating near some of the sheltered areas, please keep a reasonable distance during the important nesting period. Also, if you know of or see a natural nesting site that loons are currently nesting on, please let Dwayne know via the CLA information centre which is opening soon. Remember, we are all stewards of this beautiful natural treasure called Charleston Lake, right in our own backyards.