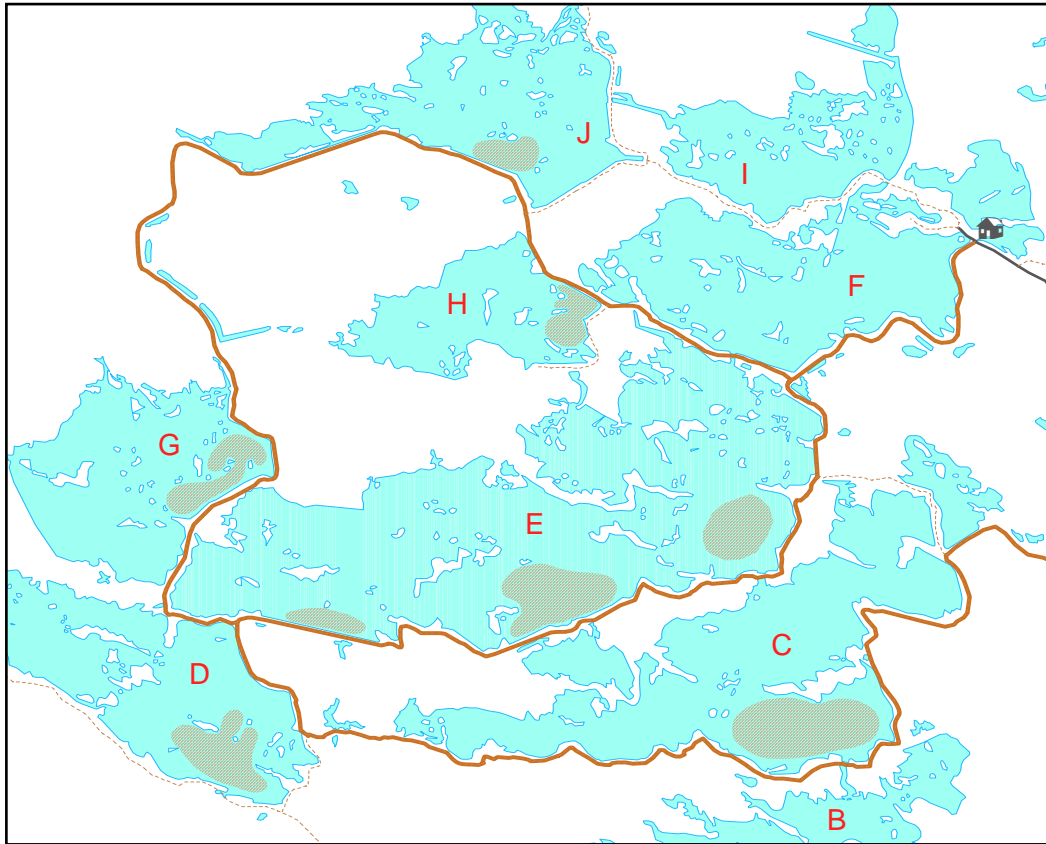


COMMON LOONS AT SENEY NWR ~ JUNE 2005

There are currently 15 pairs of common loons occupying refuge territories, including six on pools adjacent to the Marshland Auto Drives. Breeding pairs occupy **C, D, E east, E west, G** and **J**, while **B** north, **H** and **I** are often used for feeding by these pairs and by unmatched individuals. Shaded sections on the map below indicate those areas where visitors are most likely to spot refuge loons:



The collective status (as of June 7) of these six Auto Drive pairs reflects something of the dynamic nature of the common loon's breeding season: **E east** hatched two downy young on June 4 (see photo on reverse side). **D, G,** and **J** have already failed in their first nesting attempt of the season; thus far only **J** has re-nested (possible reasons for these failures include agitation from blackflies, interference from trumpeter swans, and intrusions from unpaired loons). **E central** just began nesting last week – as incubation lasts 28 days, their chicks will not appear until the end of June. Lastly, a new male on **C** pool, who evicted the old **C** male during spring, has since been sporadically battling with several additional intruding challengers over most of May, leaving little time for the business of breeding. It is likely that the **C** pair will not nest during 2005.

As a population Seney loons have been exceedingly successful: from 1987–2004 pairs fledged an average of 0.69 chicks per season. While this figure seems modest, it is in fact the highest documented rate in the state, and more than twice the measure of other well-studied Upper Peninsula populations (including the 100+ pairs within the federally-designated wilderness of Isle Royale National Park). The likeliest explanation for such fecundity is the unique protection that Seney loons receive – an absence of watercraft means that human disturbance does not interfere with breeding activity, especially during the highly sensitive period of incubation.

Because the refuge functions as the best available approximation of 'natural' loon behavior, it has served a valuable site for extensive research into the life history of the species. Since 1987 most Seney adults and juveniles have been color-marked during nighttime banding, and consequently monitored as identifiable individuals from year to year. The results of such work can be illustrated through several examples:

(over)

The first adult loon color-marked on refuge was Papa, the G pool male [at left below, with exposed leg bands]. Over the span of a decade he fledged six offspring with four different mates. This latter detail, supported by other early instances of pair switching among color-marked Seney loons, first dispelled the longstanding myth that the species mates for life. While some pairs do indeed show more commitment than Papa – the current record for uninterrupted partnership is 13 years – refuge loons demonstrate a predilection toward ‘divorce’ at a rate of 17% per season. Before Papa could procure a fifth partner his tenure at Seney ended abruptly in 1998, the first of several banded loons predated by one of the G pool bald eagles.

Papa’s legacy, however, has continued via his offspring. After three years spent as a juvenile on southern wintering grounds, one of his 1987 chicks – the ABJ – returned to Seney in 1990 as a breeding adult [at right below, with downy young hatched on June 4]. At that point his ‘breeding’ status was merely a theoretical possibility: it took seven years before he acquired a viable territory (E pool east) and willing mate; he was 11 before he hatched and fledged his first young. Since that time he has flourished as a parent, producing a refuge-high 1.67 chicks per season. Now 18, he is the oldest loon of known age in North America.



In recent seasons ABJ’s own offspring have begun to reappear on refuge as breeding adults, and have formed the third generation of color-marked Seney loons. T7 [at left below, as a six week-old juvenile in 1999] needed only two seasons following his 2002 return before claiming the G territory of his deceased grandfather. Somewhat predictably, his first attempt at nesting in 2004 ended in failure; while refuge pairs with at least one season of breeding experience successfully produce young 65% of the time, that rate falls to 35% for first-year pairs. While T7’s initial 2005 breeding attempt also failed, he will likely attempt to re-nest with his G mate (Plumdot) in the coming week.

Papa, ABJ and T7 are but three of the 150 refuge loons who have been color-marked and monitored at Seney since 1987. Their collective life histories have illuminated many heretofore unknown aspects of loon population dynamics, including site and mate fidelity, lifetime productivity, juvenile recruitment, and longevity. In regard to the last variable, data from Seney suggest that roughly half of refuge adults will live beyond 35 years of age. While encouraging in itself, such a finding has important implications for the longterm viability of loons in Michigan – the longer an individual (or breeding pair) lives, the longer it might take to perceive the consequences of poor productivity evidenced elsewhere in the state.



For further information regarding the conservation implications of loon research at Seney or the current status of common loons throughout Michigan contact Damon McCormick at (906) 202 0602 or commoncoast@msn.com

