

Loon watch program wants volunteers

Few things say that it's summer in Nova Scotia like the beautiful yet haunting call of the loon. In an effort to keep it that way, dozens of volunteers in Queens County have been watching their favorite lakes for loons and their chicks. Volunteers have adopted specific lakes, kept their eyes open for loons, counted the number they saw, and recorded the loons' activities.

"The Loon Watch program has been a big success. We were hoping to get volunteers on 20 lakes but about 35 are now being monitored. Anyone who has an interest in loons and regularly watches or visits a lake or river is invited to participate," says Pierre Martel, the Loon Watch coordinator at the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute (MTRI).

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Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site has been running a smaller scale Loon Watch within the Park for

over 10 years. MTRI's Loon Watch Program will build on the existing information by collecting data on lakes where people

have their homes and cottages.

"We are looking for a broad picture of loon health in the area. Many factors have made it difficult for loons to breed successfully in past years," says Martel. "Loon nests, for example, are vulnerable to water level changes.

Loons can't walk easily on land so they nest close to the water but fluctuations can either drown the nest or leave it high and dry."

"It is important to monitor loons and their breeding success because they are top predators in the aquatic food chain and they are sensitive to acid rain and other pollutants as well as the weather," says Darien Ure, a scientist at Kejimikujik and member of MTRI's board of directors.

Loon Watch volunteers checked their lakes monthly this summer and recorded their findings. On Loon Watch day, Aug. 20, volunteers performed simultaneous surveys between noon and 3 p.m. This year there were very few loon chicks reported but MTRI is still collecting the data. If anyone would like to report the loons on their lake, please contact the MTRI by phone at 682-2371 or by e-mail at info@merseytobeatic.ca. The Loon Watch program at MTRI was made possible through funding from Parks Canada and the Nova Scotia Go for Green Fund.