



The Red-Throated Loon

The Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy

The Red-Throated Loon has the following characteristics:

- considered to be a member of the most ancient bird families;
- scientific name *Cavia stellata* means "the seabird whose back is set with stars";
- smallest and most widely distributed member of all loons;
- only loon that can take off directly from land as well as water;
- fastest loon, clocking speeds of almost 80 kilometres per hour;
- unlike other loons, both males and females are very vocal, often calling together;
- spectacular courtship dance likened to a Plesiosaur, a long-necked aquatic dinosaur;
- called the "laughing loon" from its rapid kwuk-kwuk-kwuk flight call;
- a monogamous species, forming life-long pair bonds;
- nests on small islands out of reach of most predators;
- regularly feeds far from its breeding territory then returns with fish for young;
- dual eyelids allow clear vision both above and below water;
- among the most sociable of loons, gathering in migration flocks of up to 500;
- legendary foreteller of storms – short cries for good weather, wailing cries for bad;
- traditionally used for food and ceremonial clothing; and,
- figures in many aboriginal creation stories as the bearer of earth from the seabottom.

"Two birds rushed about swiftly in the water in a nearly upright attitude with only the rear of the body submerged and raised head and extended neck."

– E. O. Hohn, *Observations on the Behaviour of Certain Arctic Birds*

Reminding Us of Common Values

The red-throated loon is a perfect emblem to represent the values and vision of the Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy. It is a shared treasure, breeding across the NWT both above and below the treeline. As a bird that depends on aquatic habitats for survival, it points to water's central place in the health of our land. Equipped with "double vision" for both water and air, the red-throated loon reminds us to weigh both short and long-term effects of all land use decisions, and to always keep both ecological and cultural values in view. Its wide-ranging feeding habits and extensive migration call to mind the interconnectedness of special areas that must be managed in a broad regional context rather than as isolated islands. Its legendary role as a weather barometer points to the importance of protected areas as indicators of change in the wider northern landscape. Lastly, the red-throated loon's laughing call inspires us to remember the joy of living in a healthy land and safeguarding it for future generations.

"In summer its repertoire is weird and varied, in keeping with the wildness of the arctic-tundra ponds it frequents."

– Earl Godfrey, *The Birds of Canada*