



# the love of loons

Loons are a sentinel species. Their health is indicative of the health of their environment.

PHOTO BY PAM BARBOU

## Local outdoorsers help researchers on Lake Jocassee

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK

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SALEM — Brooks Wade first heard a loon in his late 20s while working as a commercial fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's the sound of wildness in nature," he said. "Just about anybody who's ever heard a loon is almost mystified by it. They cast a spell on you."

Wade has been under the spell of the loons ever since. When he and his wife, Kay, moved to the Upstate in 2010, they worked as campground hosts at Devil's Fork State Park.

On a foggy morning in March, Brooks walked down to the shore with a cup of coffee at daybreak — a practice which soon became his morning ritual.

"I heard loons wailing from across the lake, and there went that cup of coffee," he said.

By 2012, he and Kay had noticed the large population of loons on Lake Jocassee and started hosting loon tours by boat in the winter.

"Oddly enough, a lot of these folks that live on Lake Keowee have tons of memories of loons from growing up in the New England area and upper Midwest," Brooks said. "So we



Brooks Wade, left, holds a loon in his lap while night tagging. He and Jim Paruk were out tagging, sampling and recording data from the loon population on Lake Jocassee.

PHOTO BY DARRELL SNOW

found all of these people who would love to go see loons."

After a few years, Brooks

built up his courage and contacted an operation called Loon Watch. He wanted to

graphs and descriptions of the loons they'd been observing on Lake Jocassee. Soon he received a phone call from the lead researcher at Biodiversity Research Institute.

"I was riding down Highway 11 and I got this phone call from a guy named Jim Paruk," he said. "I pulled off the road, and 30 minutes later I'm thinking that I've never met a more enthusiastic human being about loons in my life. It turns out that he's the leading field researcher on loons in the country."

Although loons are the most studied bird in North America not much is known about their winter ecology. So Paruk was thrilled to hear about Brooks and Kay's findings. Two winters ago, he sent his assistant down to take a look.

"We spent the day on the lake, and the young biologist was excited and reported back to his boss," Brooks said. "The following year, both of them came."

Paruk and his field assistant stayed for three days last year, and they'll return next month for five days. A three-year study will begin in 2017.

"There's so many reasons loons are important, but the



PHOTO BY BOB MIRACLE

Wade said some people think loons are hard on the fish population in the lake, but the birds can only eat a small percentage of their body weight in fish every day — only a couple of pounds a day.

## LOON: Teaming up to learn more about the mysterious bird abundant in America

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One reason is because they're considered a sentinel species, which means they're at the top of the food chain," he said. "There's a concern about the health of the loons is indicative of the health of the environment in which they live." Ninety-five percent of the loons in North America overwinter in the Gulf of Mexico. A majority of Paruk's research has focused on the effects of the BP oil spill on aquatic life in the gulf. Studying the loon population on Lake Jocassee will provide a control for measuring these effects. When Paruk and his assistant

visited last year, the Wades took the scientists out on the lake for daytime observations and night tagging.

"I had to learn how to navigate the lake in pitch darkness. The loons want to swim away from the boat — they're not panicking but they swim away," Brooks said. "So you move the boat slowly up to the bird so they don't spook. About 19 out of 20 birds will dip down when you put the net into the water, but one out of 20 doesn't. And that's the one you get."

He said the birds are strong, so they have to be handled carefully. Once the loon realizes it

has lost control, it calms down and let the researchers do their work. Brooks felt honored to finally hold the bird that has mystified him all these years.

"Thirty years of loving loons, and all of a sudden I've got this big 12-pound, warm, beautiful bird in my lap," he said. "It was an overwhelming experience for me. I didn't want anybody to see the tears in my eyes."

Once the bird was tagged and the scientists had their samples and records, they released the loon back into the water.

"You'd think the bird would be panicking and running away like crazy, but they just swim off

like it never happened," he said.

Loons live long lives — about 30 years. They migrate back and forth to the same location every summer and winter. Brooks said the birds are considered the other iconic bird of North America next to the bald eagle, at least to the eastern part of the U.S.

"They're ancient. When you look at them today, that's what they looked like five million years ago," he said. "They go all the way back into Native American folklore. They've affected the minds and art of human beings since they've lived in this part of the planet."

Paruk's three-year study will be published by Earthwatch, an international citizen science organization. The eight to ten week programs will bring national attention to the wonders of Lake Jocassee in the winter.

RED LOCKS TO PUT ON (E-Y-R)  
Top Guns Mail Storage, Salem  
Beginning on January 24, 2018  
Ending on January 24, 2018  
Completed on January 28, 2018 at 09:28 AM



**Brooks Wade said catching the loons was the hard part, but once the birds calmed down the rest of the work was easy.**

PHOTO BY DARRELL SNOW