Lake Jocassee draws loons and watchers

Why birds winter in Upstate spurs study

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SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT MAIL

LAKE JOCASSEE - The first question that comes to mind about the loons wintering on Lake Jocassee is why are they here?

The common loon normally winters on the Atlantic or Gulf coasts, but significantly more than 100 seem to find the cold, crystal-clear waters of Lake Jocassee a place they can shelter from the bitterly cold winters of their normal summer haunts in the upper United States and Canada.

"That's one of the things about these loon, historically they wouldn't even be here on this man-made lake," said Dan Whitten, a South Carolina master naturalist and frequent loon observer.

But the loons are on the lake, and while scientists draw no clear line between their presence and an event occurring seven years ago, the loons' presence is giving scientists as well as birdwatchers a unique opportunity.

When the Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded in April 2010, resulting in a dump of millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, many species were affected, including the loon. Loons in the Gulf were found to have oil residue in their blood, which affected both their weight and red cell counts.

According to James Paruk, senior scientist at the Center for Loon Conservation at the Biodiversity Research Institute, and Jay Mager, associate professor of Biological and Allied Health Sciences at Ohio Northern University, who are spearheading an EarthWatch study of the Lake Jocassee loons, the examination of these birds in a near-pristine freshwater environment produces a treasure trove of comparative data on the health and behavior of loons essential to their understanding and preservation.

So it was that a chilly but clear February day found Whitten, Brooks Wade, EarthWatch scientist and Lake Jocassee nature tour guide, and a pontoon boatload of bird enthusiasts heading for the upper reaches of Lake Jocassee.

Filled in the early 1970s, the 9,000-acre lake that reaches into North Carolina is fed by waterfalls and whitewater streams that result in one of the purest, clearest bodies of water around. Seeing down to depths of more than 20 feet is usually possible. Small wonder that the National Geographic Society has designated the Jocassee area one of the world's great natural areas.

The lake's shores are one of the places the rare Oconee Bell flower can be found, which grows in no other area of the world. Bird enthusiasts come to see ospreys, at least two varieties of greaves, peregrine falcons and bald eagles. A recent study, in fact, found 12 eagles around the lake.

For their part, though, the loons favor the far-flung coves of the lake's upper reaches.

"You find them grouped up there," Wade. "The streams feeding into the narrow coves concentrate the forage fish, and they can feed more easily."

The feeding in groups is one behavior observed in the Lake Jocassee loons that isn't seen in their historical wintering grounds, where solitary feeding is the habit. Why is another of the perplexing questions scientists hope to solve, in addition to investigating the birds' overall health.

The concentration of loons in the narrow pockets also affords the scientists with a chance not before found.

"You can get closer to them here than anywhere else," Wade said. "In the marine (sea coast) world, you could never get this close."

At this time of the year, the loons cannot fly. They live on the lake, for the most part, eating their fill of fish (usually catching and swallowing fish underwater lest another loon grab it from them) and generally only waddle a short distance from the water when they venture on shore. An occasional stray feather in the water shows that the birds are molting.

"When they leave here in about a month, they'll have their mating plumage," Whitten said. "But until then, they can't get airborne."

A full-grown loon can weigh as much as a bald eagle, according to Whitten, but with a wingspan only about a third as wide.

"It takes them a while to get going," he said. "They need a long run into the wind, but once they get in the air they're magnificent flyers."



A full-grown loon can weigh as much as a bald eagle, but with a much shorter wingspan.

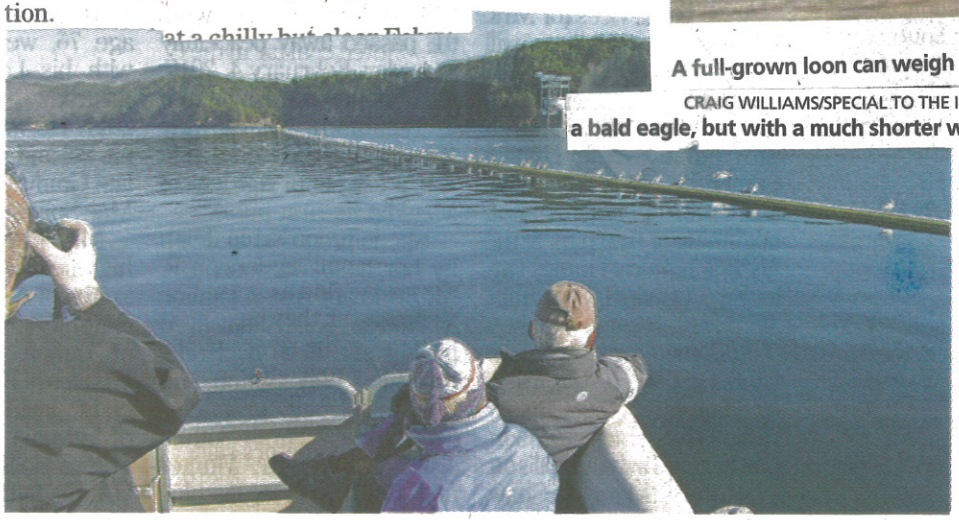
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Another key question is how many of the loons return each winter. In the four years that loons have visited Lake Jocassee, some have been caught and banded. Spotting a band on a loon has become a mark of prestige for birdwatchers. A photograph of it is a trophy shot. Another EarthWatch banding effort is due to begin in about a week.

In about a month, the loons are expected to leave Lake Jocassee, off to points north as their summering grounds begin to warm with the dawning spring. Until then, the scientists will study them, and birdwatchers will flock to see them.

The loons will be given a sendoff of sorts, as the Friends of Jocassee conservation group has timed its BellFest 2017 for March 18, by which time it's expected most loons will be in full plumage and looking northward. They'll leave questions behind that the scientists and bird enthusiasts observing them still hope to answer. But the data gathered while the loons are here will, it's hoped, provide some clues

Hopefully, too, there will be next year. In learning about birds, said longtime watcher Whitten, "you have to take what you can get on the wing."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Birdwatchers observe the wildlife on Lake Jocassee. Scientists are studying loons wintering on the lake, which is unusual because the waterfowl typically winter in coastal areas.