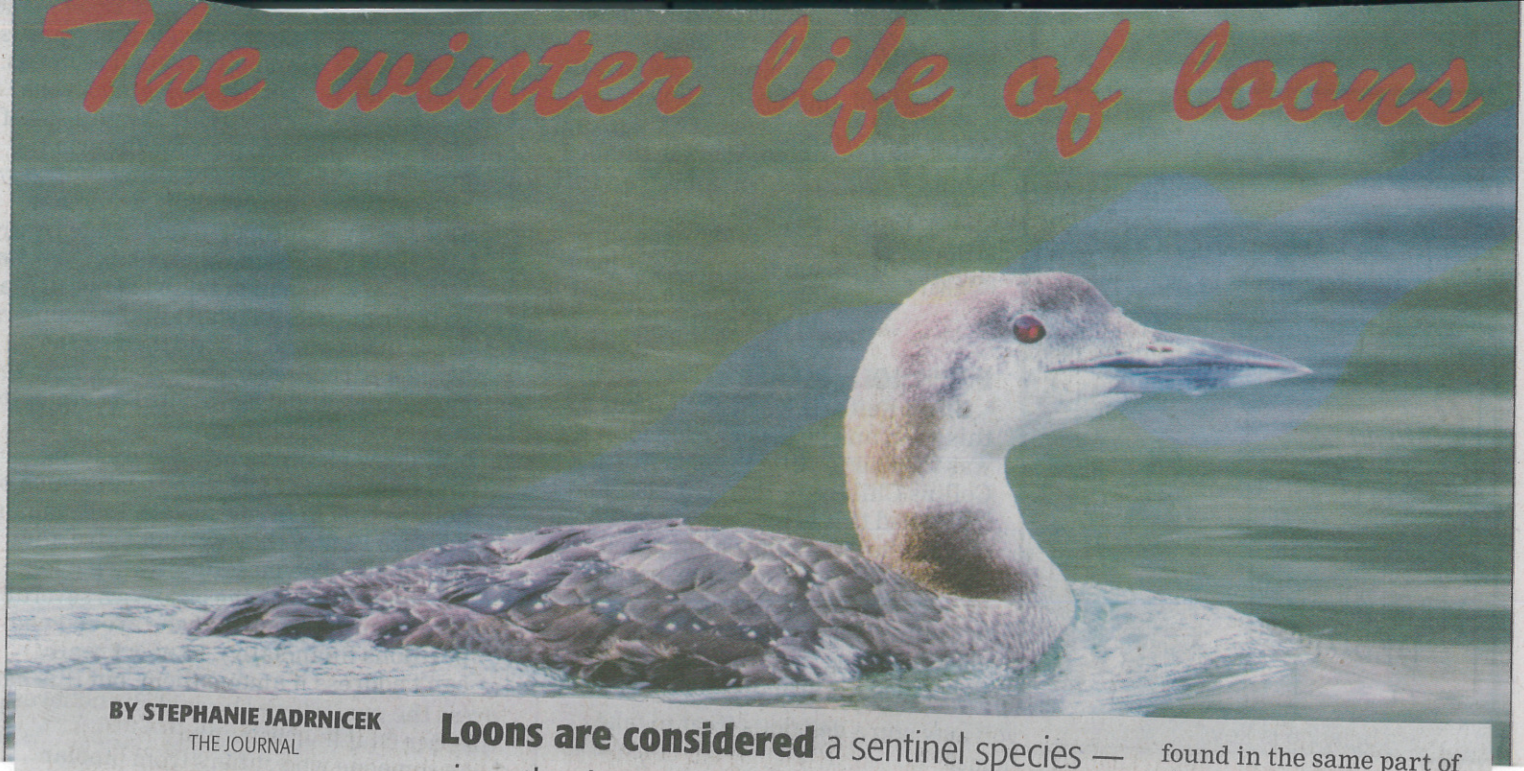
The winter life of loons



BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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SALEM — When Jim Paruk's old college roommate called him asking for help, he headed from his home in California to Western Michigan University.

The year was 1988. They'd become buddies eight years earlier, and his friend was now working on his master's degree.

"Part of his research was trying to figure out how to catch the common loon, and people had been working on this for quite a while, but had been unsuccessful," Paruk said. "So I went out there and we worked on a capture technique that would be successful. That roped me into loons, and I wanted to continue working with them because they are fascinating birds."

Paruk, an associate professor at Saint Joseph's College of Maine, is one of the country's lead researchers in the study of the common loon. He's heading a three-year Earthwatch research project on wintering loons on Lake Jocassee — the first study of loon behavior in a freshwater habitat. Earthwatch is an international citizen science organization.

"I've been working with winter loons for 10 years — that's my niche," he said. "There's so much breeding biology that's being done, but there are fewer people doing winter research. So I started studying loons in the winter."

Loons breed across Canada and throughout the northern U.S. states. All of those loons migrate in the winter because the lakes freeze and they can no longer catch fish, so they have to go someplace where there's open water.

"Historically, they go to the ocean, which was a great place. Around the 20th century, the government started getting involved in hydroelectric projects, creating dams and reservoirs, which then became these new potential water bodies where loons can overwinter," Paruk. "That's what we're seeing with Lake Jocassee — it's farther south, the lake doesn't freeze and it has abundant fish — so the loons are migrating there."

Paruk has been studying the health and behavior of loons off the coast of Louisiana since the 2010 Deep Water Horizon oil spill and will use the data collected on Lake Jocassee to compare the well-being of loons in a pristine, freshwater environment to the condition of loons wintering within the spill area.

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"We're trying to obtain tissue samples from loons that were in an area heavily exposed to oil to see how it moved through the food chain — if that is affecting loons currently, and if we are seeing any effects from that," Paruk said. "Lake Jocassee could be used as a comparative sight for looking at the health of the loons in the winter."

One reason for Paruk's research is to gain baseline data on the health of wintering loons in a low-stress population, and he said Lake Jocassee is an ideal place to study.

"I think it's easier for a loon to overwinter on a lake than it is on the ocean," he said. "I think there's less stress — you're not dealing with tides or currents, and storms are much more severe on the coast. I think the loons on Lake Jocassee are in very good condition. The ones I've handled are robust, alert and healthy."

A loon he'd banded two years ago was seen again this year on Lake Jocassee, which [illegible] found in the same part of the lake for three consecutive winters — something Paruk considers "pretty cool."

He will offer a talk and tour on Saturday at Devil's Fork State Park. The talk starts at 10 a.m. and is free and open to the public. The loon tour on the lake will follow at 11 a.m. — it's available by reservation only to new or renewing members of the Friends of Jocassee. There is a fee of $20 for the lake tour portion of the program.

Friends of Jocassee member Brooks Wade first told Paruk about the loon population overwintering on the lake. He fell in love with loons in his late 20s when he first heard their mysterious caws in the Gulf of Mexico. And he's been under their spell ever since.

"Loons are one of the oldest lived, most interesting and beautiful birds on our planet," Wade said. "The vast majority of loons winter in marine environments off the Atlantic coast of Florida and across the northern Gulf of Mexico, so this wonderful population of loons that winter on Lake Jocassee gives bird lovers a rare and remarkably close opportunity for observing them."

For more information, call (864) 250-5501 or email friendsofjocassee@gmail.com.