



McWAIN POND NEWS

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Lakeside residents play big parts in drama of a loon's birth

by Bill Nemitz, August 6, 2006

WATERFORD - Put away the Jet Ski and turn off the boom box. Here's a story about the real magic of Maine's summer.

It began back on the morning of June 19, when Ed Damon looked out from his summer camp and saw a loon sitting at the end of his dock, just inches above rain-swollen McWain Pond. Damon moved closer . . . and closer . . . and finally was able to bend down and actually touch it. And much to his amazement, the bird didn't flinch.

"I thought it was hurt," said Ed. "When you can walk right up to a loon like that, you figure something ails it."

Ed went inside and told his wife, Beverly, to come see.

Beverly took one look at the loon, as well as its mate having a fit nearby in the water. Then she recalled how for a week the pair had been cruising back and forth past the dock, as if looking for something.

"I think she might be laying an egg," Beverly said.

Bingo. Within an hour, the mother loon got up and slipped into the water. And there, stabilized by the dock line she'd pulled over with her beak, sat a freshly laid egg.

Now Ed and Beverly knew that, with the grandchildren due in a week or so, their dock was no place for a loon birthing. What's more, Ed had to get to work at his barbershop in nearby Norway and Beverly had a doctor's appointment that morning, so there was no way they could baby-sit the egg until the mother loon came back.

Enter the next-door neighbors, Bill and Nancy Hanger. Ed called them, explained what had happened, and asked if they could help. Bill and Nancy, who have lived on the lake year-round since retiring here from Ohio in 1999, came running.

And with that, a local legend was born.

"At first, nobody knew what to do," said Bill. "We were going to call Maine Audubon, but it was still too early."

So they called the Lakes Environmental Association in



Loon Photos by Bill & Nancy Hanger

Bridgton, which put them in touch with a woman who specializes in bird rescues.

"She told us we could bring the egg to her - and she would guarantee a live birth," Bill said. "But she also said the parents could do a better job raising and taking care of it on their own."



Ed Damon and Mother Loon

On the spot, the Hangers decided to let nature take its course - with a little help.

They immediately ruled out the dock, which would soon be alive with boats, grandkids and the general hubbub of summer, as a delivery room. That meant they had to construct an alternative - and fast.

Bill called Henry Plate down the road and asked if he still had some of those chunks of Styrofoam around. He did. And Eddie Muzik had a section of dock decking he wasn't using. And the Hangers' grandchildren had all those "noodles" they used to float in the water.

WATCHING AND WAITING

First they built a float. Then they covered it with 200 pounds of soil, grass and spongy moss. Then they set it afloat and walked it over to the dock.

Finally, just as the bird lady had instructed him, Bill gingerly lifted the egg and placed it in the small depression they'd sculpted into McWain Pond's new "island."

The parent loons watched it all unfold from well offshore, flapping their wings and wailing with anxiety.

"But within two hours, they were back," Nancy said. "And they looked at it and thought, 'This is all just fine.'"

The next day, while the adult loons were away, the Hangers moved the float 50 feet away from the dock. The day after that, while the mother fluffed her wings and the father played high-speed underwater chicken with Nancy's kneecaps, they tugged it another 200 feet from harm's way and anchored it with two cinder blocks.

That's when they noticed there were now two eggs in the nest.

And so began the vigil. Day after day, nary an hour passed without the Damons and Hangers peering out to see if anything had hatched. Other neighbors started showing up, too.

Peter Leslie, concerned that boaters might not see the nest, brought down a few buoys and a long length of mooring line and installed a floating perimeter to give the loons some privacy. Annette Tomaino declared that, in honor of McWain Pond, the two hatchlings would be christened "Mac" and "Wayne." Barb Urell, who with her husband, Joe, had taken to monitoring the loons through their telescope, finally looked up one day and declared, "I've got to get a life."

The Damons' annual July 4 bash came and went. Nothing. The Hangers hosted a memorial party for Bill's recently deceased father and 100 pairs of eyes stared out over their cocktails at the floating nest. Still nothing.

The Hangers took to hollering "Shift change!" whenever the male and female loon relieved each other atop the eggs. But deep down in the moss, nothing moved.

Meanwhile, the word spread. Peter Leslie downloaded the Hangers' dozens of photos documenting the drama into a Power Point computer presentation, which Nancy then delivered at the July lake association meeting. Up and down the shore, people now waited for the big moment.

LIFE AND DEATH

Finally, early on the morning of July 16, one of the Hangers' three grandchildren squinted out at the nest and announced, "I think I see a head!"



Nest Delivery - Father Loon checks it out

Everyone within earshot made a beeline for the shore. And sure enough, there was little Mac poking his head out of the nest before his mother immediately nudged him into the water and his father dove and caught him a minnow. As the crowd of whispering onlookers grew to more than a dozen that Sunday, one of the kids asked Nancy whether it was time to get ready for church.

"No," Nancy replied quietly. "This is church for me today."

A few hours later, Wayne appeared. But he'd no sooner gone for a ride on his father's back and returned to the nest when he suddenly vanished. Later, while Mac and the two parents were off exploring the pond, the Hangers found the second chick dead in the bottom of the nest.

"We were really sad," said Bill, as if surprised that the loss of a baby loon could hit a grown man so hard. "It was

very, very sad.”

But life went on - and Mac went with it. Within a day or two, he and his parents left the nest and headed across to an undeveloped stretch of shoreline on the west side of the pond.

Ed Damon's been out there almost daily ever since, grinning from his boat while the parents dive for fish and feed their rapidly growing boy.

“He looks real good,” Damon said. “Oh yeah, he must be triple the size he was when he was born.”

Good news, of course, travels fast in Maine's small towns. The story of Mac and his many “godparents” had no sooner appeared on the front page of the Norway Advertiser Democrat before the Hangers started hearing from waterfront dwellers near and far - all seeking Bill's expert advice on how to build a loon's nest of their own.

Bill promises he'll help them all. As for his float, he plans to pull it ashore carefully this fall.

“And then I'm going to haul that son of a gun right back out there the day after ice-out,” he said. “You bet.”

By that time, he'll likely be wearing the T-shirt his brother suggested they all have made to alert visitors that there's something a little different about this slice of paradise - something that comes over these locals when they talk about how a fragile egg came to define a whole summer.

And exactly what might those T-shirts say?

Bill chuckled. Tracing the imaginary words across his chest, he said, “We are part of the loon-atic fringe.”

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MCWAIN POND ASSOCIATION

PO Box 58, Waterford ME 04088

OFFICERS & TRUSTEES

President: Peter Leslie	207-775-0700 207-221-3288 pleslie@maine.rr.com
Vice-President: Peter Sevcik	434-249-1310 207-583-2039 Peter@netforecast.com
Secretary: Annette Tomaino	973-635-8537 207-583-4530 Attping@aol.com
Treasurer: Tony Butterall	207-583-2955 tonybutterall@yahoo.com

Donna Butterall	Peter Leslie
Tony Butterall	Earl Morse
Bob Crocker	Peg Nation
Nancy Hanger	Henry Plate
Dave Hanson	Peter Sevcik
Paul Krinsky	Annette Tomaino
Bruce Whichard	

Between Mud Season and Summer.....by William S. Hanger

One day in late winter of 2005, I discovered an article in the “Lewiston Sun Journal” about the Maine Black Fly Breeders Association and an Arizona laboratory. Apparently, the lab had contacted the Breeders Association to request a supply of black flies so the association requested those in the area with “Bug Zappers” to send them dead black flies.

I emailed Holly Garner-Jackson of the association and learned that the lab was conducting research on animal sensitivity to black fly bites. She asked me to send her any flies I could collect and suggested that I place them in a baggie, put it in a box and mail it to them in Machias, Maine.

I dutifully fired up my Mosquito Magnet and began to collect. About four weeks later I had a small collection in the net of my machine. By the way, the Mosquito Magnet, while somewhat expensive, really does work. It attracts female black flies and mosquitoes, traps them and thus disrupts the breeding cycle. Only females bite. I emptied the critters into a baggie, placed them in a small box – a Godiva chocolate box – and mailed them off with a note suggesting that my collection contained both mosquitoes and black flies.

A few days later I received an email message from Holly thanking me for the flies, noting the lovely box in which they were shipped and telling me that while my collection was appreciated, it did take some time to sort through and separate the mosquitoes from the black flies. I also received a

certificate, suitable for framing, naming me as a Member in Good Standing of the Maine Black Fly Breeders Association, complete with a raised seal. I was surprised and pleased and showed several friends my certificate, many of whom gazed upon it in disbelief.

Imagine my surprise when in April 2006 I received the following email message from Holly Garner-Jackson:

“Hi Bill
The Maine Black Fly Breeders Association (MBBA) is trying to collect more black flies for the lab in Arizona this year. You had the best ones we received last year. We are trying to start earlier this year as we fell short of the 100 gram goal of last year. Hope you can help us out again this year.”

Needless to say, my chest filled with pride and I fired up the old Mosquito Magnet to begin a new collection for Holly.

So if you Summer People wonder what we do up here between Mud Season and spring, we help contribute to the ever-increasing body of scientific literature by capturing the famous Maine Black Fly. Feel free to join in on the fun if you happen to be around during the season. *Holly can be reached at mainebblackfly@gmail.com.*

Did You Know?...

...that Maine lakes generate \$3.5 billion annually for the state's economy and 53,000 jobs? This is a greater impact than Maine seafood or potato industries. This revenue depends on our keeping our lakes clean. Water clarity is considered by 98% of all buyers of property. The major threat to water quality is erosion. Another threat is invasive plants.

Source: Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research and the Maine Congress of Lake Associations.

...that the spring 1982 McWain Pond Newsletter reported the ice over data for the period 1974 to 1981. The median ice over date was December 8th. This year it was December 23rd. Climate change? Obviously this is a small sample. Anybody have any longer records of ice over and ice out?

...the McWain Pond Association has 32 paid members, fewer than one half the shorefront property owners. If you are one of those who have not yet joined, please send a check to Tony Butterall, Treasurer, McWain Pond Association PO Box 58, Waterford, ME 04088. Individual membership is \$15, and Family membership is \$25. Please support the important work your association is doing to protect and enhance the pond. Dues are tax deductible. Thanks.



Photo by Peter Leslie

Watershed Survey Volunteer Nick Bolduc

SAVE THE DATE
2007 Annual Meeting
July 14 • Birch Rock Camp • 10 am

Watershed Study Nears Completion.....by Jeff Stern

As the McWain Pond Watershed Survey nears completion, the steering committee for the project met three weeks before the holidays to review progress. Coordinator Jeff Stern summarized the successful 2006 field season, during which intrepid volunteers from the McWain Pond Association and the community scoured the watershed for erosion problems.

In all, the survey uncovered 95 separate erosion sites. Most (30) were related to residential properties. In addition, there were 17 town road sites, 13 driveways, and 12 commercial - relating to the two summer camps in the watershed. The balance included 7 private road, 5 beach, 3 construction, 3 path, 3 boat access, 1 logging road and 1 state road site.

While 95 sounds like a lot, most erosion sites were low impact, and can be fixed easily and inexpensively. For example, rainfall that runs off a roof and falls on to bare soil can carry soil into the pond. A simple gravel trench installed below the roof's drip line will protect the ground and keep soil from washing away.

Why is this important? Eroding soil that's flushed into the pond carries phosphorus. If too much phosphorus enters McWain Pond an algae bloom will result. Such blooms spoil fishing, swimming and boating - they even reduce shoreline property values. Water testing indicates McWain Pond is at risk. By identifying erosion problems, the watershed survey is the first step to reducing the threat.

A draft report that summarizes survey findings has been sent to the steering committee for review. The report contains recommendations for fixing each of the 95 erosion sites, maps, and detailed information about protecting water quality. The final report will be printed in March and will be widely distributed. Meanwhile, the steering committee will meet to discuss future plans to protect McWain Pond now that the survey is nearly behind us.

From the outset, the McWain Pond Watershed Survey has been a cooperative, locally-led effort. No regulation is or will be involved; it's all about people working together to protect our wonderful pond. As we move forward with plans to control erosion, we'll remain faithful to this spirit of cooperation.