

Yellow-billed Loon Questions and Answers

March, 2009

What do yellow-billed loons look like?

The yellow-billed loon (Order Gaviiformes, Family Gaviidae) is one of the largest of the five loon species and similar in appearance to the common loon (*Gavia immer*). Yellow-billed loons are distinguished from common loons by their larger yellow or ivory bill. During the nonbreeding season, yellow-billed loons lose their distinctive black and white plumage and molt into dull, light brown feathers. Hatchlings are gray and brown, and juveniles are gray with a paler head. There are no recognized subspecies or geographic variations.

Where are yellow-billed loons found?

Yellow-billed loons nest near freshwater lakes in arctic tundra of Alaska on the Arctic Coastal Plain (ACP), northwestern Alaska and St. Lawrence Island; in Canada east of the Mackenzie Delta and west of Hudson Bay; and in Russia on a relatively narrow strip of coastal tundra from the Chukotka Peninsula in the east and on the western Taymyr Peninsula in the west, with a break in distribution between these two areas. The wintering range includes coastal waters of southern Alaska from the Aleutian Islands to Puget Sound; the Pacific coast of Asia from the Sea of Okhotsk south to the Yellow Sea; the Barents Sea and the coast of the Kola Peninsula; coastal waters of Norway; and possibly Great Britain.

How many yellow-billed loons are there?

The global breeding ground population size for yellow-billed loons is unknown, but probably in the range of 16,000-32,000, with an Alaska population of 3,000-4,000. Maximum estimates based on the amount of available habitat (plus limited survey data for Canada) are 20,000 birds in Canada and 8,000 in Russia.

What are the characteristics of yellow-billed loon nesting habitat?

Yellow-billed loons nest exclusively in coastal and inland low-lying tundra, in association with permanent, fishbearing lakes. Lakes that are able to support breeding loons have abundant fish populations; offer depths greater than two meters (six feet); are large (at least 13.4 hectares [ha]); are often connected to streams that may supply fish; feature highly convoluted, vegetated, and low-lying shorelines; and provide both clear water and dependable water levels.

What is the primary limiting factor on the yellow-billed loon?

Yellow-billed loon populations are vulnerable due to a combination of low starting population size, low reproductive rate, and very specific breeding habitat requirements

It is thought that loons occupy the same breeding territory throughout their reproductive lives. There is no reliable scientific information on lifespan and survivorship, but as large-bodied birds with low clutch size, yellow-billed loons are probably what is known as “K-selected;” that is, they are long-lived and dependent upon high annual adult survival to maintain populations.

What action is the Service taking today?

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service announced today that it has determined that listing the yellow-billed loon as a threatened or endangered species is warranted under the Endangered Species Act, but an immediate proposal to list this species is precluded by other higher priority listing actions.

The Service considered the best available data about factors that could affect yellow-billed loon populations, including subsistence harvest, oil and gas development and other contaminants, climate change, fishing by-catch, and marine pollution in wintering habitat in Asia. Subsistence harvest surveys indicated a substantial level of harvest of yellow-billed loons relative to their population, although exact harvest numbers are uncertain.

What is the history preceding today’s action?

The Secretary of the Interior received a petition to list the yellow-billed loon as threatened or endangered, and designate critical habitat, on April 5, 2004. The petition was submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity and ten other organizations.

The petition asserted that a variety of factors threaten the yellow-billed loon population. These factors were said to include destruction or modification of habitat due to oil, gas, and mineral development and pollution, lack of regulatory protection, and other factors such as mortality from drowning in fishing nets and from hunting. The petition argued that these threats, combined with other factors such as limited and specific breeding habitats, a small global population, and a low reproductive rate, make the yellow-billed loon vulnerable to extinction and less likely to recover after declines.

On June 6, 2007 the Service published a “90-day finding” in the Federal Register. The Service found that there was substantial information that the petitioned action may be warranted, so a 60-day comment period was opened and a status review of the species was initiated. Following the comment period, the Service analyzed all available information. The 12-month finding announced today finds that the petitioned action is warranted, but precluded by other pending listing actions.

What does a finding of “warranted, but precluded” mean?

“Warranted, but precluded” means the proposal to list is delayed while the Service works on listing proposals for other higher priority species. A “warranted but precluded” finding requires subsequent annual reviews of the finding until such time as either a

listing proposal is published, or a not warranted finding is made based on new information.

What is the process for adding a species to the list of threatened and endangered species under the Endangered Species Act?

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service make a finding on whether a petition to list, delist, or reclassify a species presents substantial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted. This finding is based on information contained in the petition, supporting information submitted with the petition, and information otherwise available to the FWS at the time of the finding. To the maximum extent practicable, the Service makes this finding within 90-days of the receipt of the petition and publishes this 90-day finding promptly in the *Federal Register*. If the Service finds that substantial information is presented, it commences a review of the status of the species which is to be completed, if feasible, within 12 months of receipt of the petition. In the 12-month finding, one of three determinations is made; (1) the petitioned action is warranted, therefore the species is proposed for listing; (2) the petitioned action is not warranted; or (3) the petitioned action is warranted, but precluded by other pending listing actions.

A species is eligible for ESA listing if it is imperiled by any of the following 5 factors:

- Present or threatened destruction, modification or curtailment of its habitat or range;
- Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific or educational purposes;
- Disease or predation;
- Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
- Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

What are the threats facing the yellow-billed loon?

The Service considered the best available data about factors that could affect yellow-billed loon populations, including subsistence harvest, oil and gas development and other contaminants, climate change, fishing bycatch, and marine pollution in wintering habitat in Asia. Subsistence harvest surveys indicated a substantial level of harvest of yellow-billed loons relative to their population, although exact harvest numbers are uncertain.

In February 2009, the U.S. Geological Survey officially published a peer-reviewed report entitled, "Model-Based Predictions of the Effects of Harvest Mortality on Population Size and Trend of Yellow-Billed Loons." The model suggests that for all harvest level and population size scenarios considered, harvest would cause an otherwise stable population to decline. We believe this harvest and associated declines would be unsustainable to the rangewide population, causing a long-term decrease in abundance that would be difficult to reverse due to the low reproductive potential of the species.

Is hunting of yellow-billed loons legal today?

There is no legal harvest of yellow-billed loons allowed in the United States. However, in Alaska's North Slope Region only, a regional total of up to 20 yellow-billed loons may be kept if inadvertently caught in subsistence fishing nets and used for subsistence purposes.

What is currently being done to protect yellow-billed loon in Alaska?

The yellow-billed loon is currently protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which makes it unlawful to kill or take eggs or nests of yellow-billed loons, but does not provide protection for habitat. The species is considered a Bird of Conservation Concern in the U.S. by the Fish and Wildlife Service, and is one of the State of Alaska's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy species.

In 2006, the Service and local, State, and Federal partners signed a Conservation Agreement (CA), which is intended to help further the conservation of the yellow-billed loon by protecting its breeding, brood-rearing, and migrating habitats in Alaska. The Conservation Agreement partners will continue collaborating to collect and refine information about the yellow-billed loon to help guide future management.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has taken an active role in protecting the yellow-billed loon in Alaska. A large proportion of high-density yellow-billed loon nesting habitat on Alaska's Arctic Coastal Plain (ACP) coincides with areas of high potential for oil and gas development in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A). The Bureau of Land Management proactively worked with loon experts and the Service to identify appropriate protections for the species and its habitat. Those protections were incorporated into their Records of Decision for NPR-A and the commitment they made in the Conservation Agreement. We believe the current regulations and close consultation with the Service are sufficient to protect yellow-billed loons from population-level effects of oil and gas development on the ACP.