

Loon Finds New Home

By Craig Lincoln

On the Fourth of July, two wildlife photographers found a new life for an orphaned loon chick they had been trying to save for nearly a week.

The successful adoption came after several false starts and with a lot of help from people in the Ely area—who looked for loon families that might take the chick—and after advice from two loon researchers working in the Ely area.

“The loon researchers, after the fact, said they just never expected (an adoption),” said Jim Brandenburg, one of the photographers. “Nature always surprises us. Sometimes naive intentions will fool even the most studious and cautious of scientists.”

The tale came to a happy ending, which doesn't always happen when wildlife gets into trouble. The photographers made some right choices—including

contacting wildlife officials and getting help from scientists—and were aware of the potential dangers of dealing with a wild animal.

The chick came from a loon family Brandenburg and fellow photographer Richard Simonsen had been photographing for years. Its father died June 28 after a motorboat ran over it on Moose Lake.

A few days later, other males started swimming to its mother's territory, appearing to show interest in her.

One of the males, who was swimming circles with the female, dived and exploded [rose up] into the chick. It was thrown into the air. Later in the day, after Simonsen took it and revived it, the same thing happened.

Ted Gostomski, Loon Watch coordinator for Northland College in Ashland, said attacks on chicks by males aren't uncommon. It usually happens when birds invade another loon's territory.

Whatever the cause, the two photographers captured the chick again and then contacted the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and two loon researchers from the University of Minnesota as they started to work on saving it.

Their first attempts were unsuccessful because loon pairs ignored the chick. The photographers broadcast pleas on WELY AM 1450 and FM 92.5 asking if anyone knew of a loon family that had lost a nest or one of its chicks.

They got a call late last week about a nesting pair with a similar sized chick and went to a lake with the chick on Saturday.

The orphaned chick chirped. The adult called back. When the men released the chick, it swam to the adult loon. Another loon came flying in, warbling. It landed and swam to the chick. Then the adults started feeding the chick.

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“So there was a family of four,” Brandenburg said. “We left with lumps in our throats.”

A sentimental end to a wildlife rescue story isn't common. Wild animals die when they get into trouble, no matter what the cause. And sometimes people can cause more problems than they solve.

It's not unusual, for example, for loons to leave their chicks alone after four weeks, Gostomski said. They're actually weaning the chicks.

“A lot of times people picking up the bird will do more harm than good,” he said.

And Brandenburg pointed out that adult

loons have sharp beaks and strong necks to capture fish. They can severely injure people.

Brandenburg and Simonsen realize their situation was unusual.

“Most of the time, it's not a good ending,” Brandenburg said.