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**Biodiversity Research Institute Announces
First Successful Loon Nesting in Southern Massachusetts in a Century**

Portland, ME—Biodiversity Research Institute (BRI) announces the successful results of its long-term loon translocation and restoration project *Restore the Call*: A male loon chick that was translocated in 2015 from the Adirondack Park Region of New York to the Assawompsett Pond Complex (APC) in southeastern Massachusetts returned in 2018 to the region from which it fledged, and now in 2020 has formed a territorial pair, nested, and successfully hatched a chick in Fall River, Massachusetts. The identification of this loon (through color bands) marks the first confirmed nesting pair in southern Massachusetts in more than a century.

“It was a major milestone in loon conservation when this particular loon returned to its release lake three years after fledging,” says David C. Evers, Ph.D., BRI’s executive director and a leading expert on loon ecology and conservation. “In late June, we documented that this male mated and the pair produced a chick—visible evidence that breeding loon populations can be restored to their former habitat.”



Translocated male loon with his mate (not yet banded) and their chick. Photo taken by Ericka Griggs on June 30, 2020.

Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) are currently listed as Special Concern under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. This historic hatchling is the result of a multiyear conservation initiative with the goal of restoring loons to parts of its historic nesting range in the Bay State.

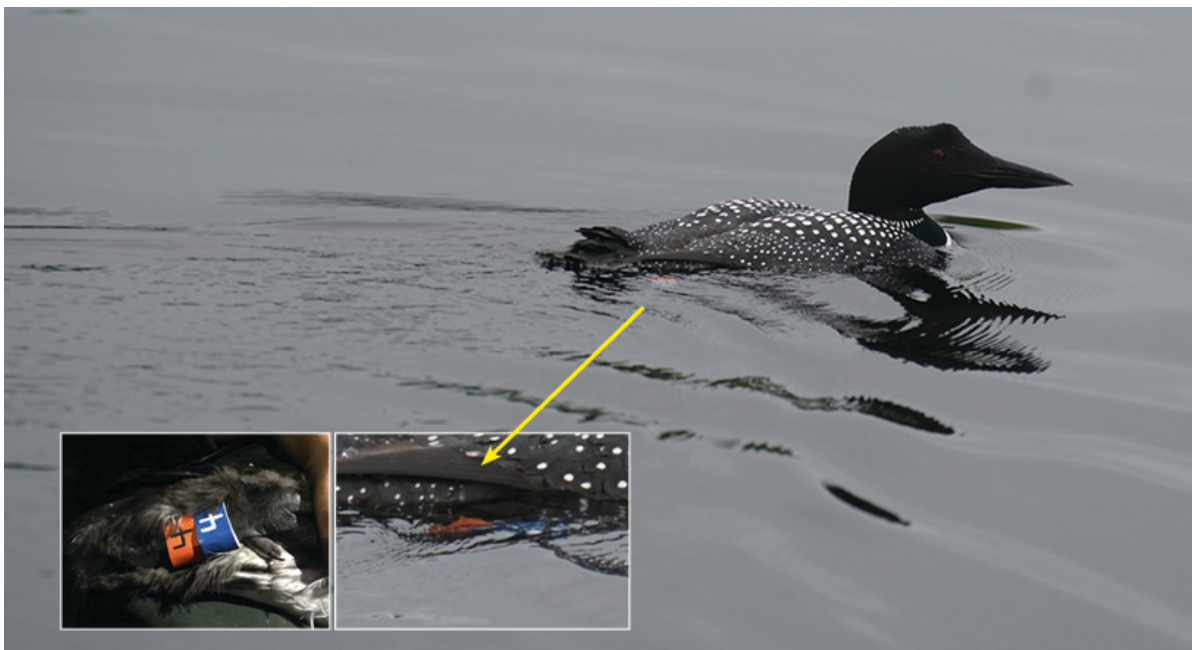
Since 2013, scientists at BRI, headquartered in Portland, Maine, have been conducting the largest loon restoration project ever attempted. The long-term goal of the *Restore the Call* project, initially funded by the Ricketts Conservation Foundation, is to strengthen and restore Common Loon populations within their existing and former range.

While restoring bird species to their former range is an accepted conservation practice, translocation (moving a species from one location to breed in another) was unprecedented for loons.

“Success for restoring loons to their former range required many months of strategic planning,” says Lucas Savoy director of BRI’s Loon Program. “Our first step was to develop a safe and replicable approach for translocation and captive rearing of loon chicks—moving them to a new lake location and confirming that they fledged from that lake to migrate to wintering grounds.” BRI’s team of wildlife biologists and veterinarians accomplished that goal by the second year of the study (2014).

In 2015, in partnership with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife), the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Maine Audubon, the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, BRI biologists relocated loon chicks from Maine and New York to the APC in Lakeville, Massachusetts. Historically, loons nested on these waterbodies before the species was extirpated in the late 1800s.

Once Common Loons fledge from their freshwater lakes, they migrate to wintering grounds on the ocean sometimes thousands of kilometers away. Typically, in their third summer, young loons return to their natal lakes to join the breeding population. The second step in the translocation study, notes Savoy, was to confirm that the loons return in their third summer to the lake to which they were translocated. In June 2018, a returning translocated loon (Chick #4-2105) was confirmed in the APC.



Returning adult loon on APC in 2018 (photo by Brian Brock). Inset left: Photo of bands taken when chick was released in 2015 (photo by Michelle Kneeland). Inset right: Close-up of leg bands on adult loon identified as Chick #4-2015.

“Now, in its fifth year, that same loon has been confirmed as nesting and producing young,” says Savoy. “Of the 24 loon chicks from Maine and New York that were translocated to Massachusetts, nine have now returned (37.5%), which is a return rate similar to wild populations. We continue to monitor for other returning loons, but this is most definitely a sign of success in loon translocation.”

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The returning loons appear to be forming pair bonds and territories. “We are thrilled with the news of the chick hatching and very pleased with the early results of the initial translocation efforts,” says Andrew Vitz, MassWildlife's State Ornithologist. “We believe that a continuation of the translocation project is the best way to increase nesting loon pairs in the state.”

RELATED BREAKING NEWS:

BRI announces it is the recipient of \$2.5M in settlement funds from MassWildlife to implement the multiyear loon restoration program in Massachusetts. The funding is part of an \$8.3M settlement and agreement to address effects on Common Loons and other shorebirds from the impacts of the *Bouchard Barge 120* oil spill in Buzzards Bay in 2003.

In Massachusetts, Common Loons disappeared as a nesting bird for decades until 1975, and have since primarily returned to breed in the Quabbin and Wachusett reservoirs and a few other central Massachusetts waters. The trustees' final restoration plan includes the release of 45-60 Common Loon chicks from Maine and New York to historic Massachusetts breeding sites at the Assawompset Pond Complex in Lakeville and in the Berkshires.

“We’re pleased to work with MassWildlife and BRI to restore Common Loons impacted from the oil spill,” says Tom Chapman, supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s New England Field Office. “This project will also help us learn more about loon translocation and expand our tools for loon conservation.”

The settlement funding, overseen by the *Bouchard Barge 120* Trustee Council,* will be distributed over six years of field work. The goal of the project is to restore Common Loons to their former breeding range in Massachusetts and to strengthen existing breeding populations within other parts of the state.

“This project brings us full circle,” says Evers, “from brainstorming our ideas on loon translocation techniques with colleagues at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when this oil spill occurred, to our work with the Ricketts Conservation Foundation on our first phase of the *Restore the Call* project developing these techniques, to this project that will allow us to utilize the knowledge and expertise we have gained over the last seven years to help restore loons by returning them to historic breeding sites in Massachusetts.”

Vitz noted there are approximately 45 pairs of territorial loons currently in Massachusetts.

“Increasing pair numbers and expanding their distribution is critical to obtaining a sustainable and robust population in Massachusetts. I look forward to working with BRI for this next phase of loon restoration.”

BRI biologists have a long history of studying loons and monitoring the effect of environmental stressors on them. “Restoring loons to their historical southern breeding range will continue to be successful in the face of climate change and associated warmings, says Evers. “A recent study in Canada has shown a 12% increase in loon productivity for every 5 degrees Fahrenheit increase in the mean maximum temperature in April.”

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The mission of Biodiversity Research Institute is to assess emerging threats to wildlife and ecosystems through collaborative research, and to use scientific findings to advance environmental awareness and inform decision makers.

Funding for BRI's *Restore the Call* project was initially provided by the Ricketts Conservation Foundation. In 2019, the Weiderhold Foundation provided funding to help with loon pair surveys in portions of Massachusetts.

*Trustees responsible for developing and implementing plans to restore natural resources injured by the *Bouchard Barge 120* oil spill include the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, representing the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs; Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and United States Fish and Wildlife Service For more information, visit: <https://darrp.noaa.gov/oil-spills/bouchard-barge-120>

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