

Common Loons on the Outer Banks

A Common Loon is shown resting on a sandy beach. The bird has a dark, pointed beak and a dark cap. Its body is covered in dark, wet-looking feathers, while its underparts are white. The bird is positioned in the center of the frame, facing left. The background consists of sand with some small debris and a shadow cast by the bird.

Outer Banks, North Carolina

Forward

This pamphlet was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this pamphlet may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.

A Mysterious Visitor

When the lakes of the north begin to freeze, Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) take flight toward the coast. Traveling hundreds of miles, they exchange their black-and-white summer plumage for a softer gray winter coat and settle into the cold, fish-rich waters of the Outer Banks. Coastal North Carolina is primarily a winter and migratory stop for loons. However, there are indeed “summering loons” documented along the Outer Banks, including Cape Hatteras.

In some years, unusually high counts of loons have been recorded in summer in the Outer Banks, sometimes linked to colder ocean currents or upwellings that support their prey.

From November through April, you can often spot loons off Cape Hatteras, Oregon Inlet, and Pea Island—diving, preening, and resting in the gentle surf.

They are built for water, with dense bones for deep dives and rear-placed legs that act like flippers. These same adaptations, however, make it nearly impossible for them to walk on land.



When You See a Loon on the Beach

Occasionally, loons appear close to shore—or even resting on the sand after storms or heavy winds. While this can look alarming, it's often normal behavior:

- Loons may rest on beaches temporarily after exhausting flights or rough surf.
- They cannot walk well due to their leg placement far back on the body.
- Most simply wait for calmer water or an incoming tide to return to sea.

Do not assume the bird needs rescue. Observe quietly from a distance (let it be). The best response is observation and patience, not interference. Approaching too closely can startle or stress the bird, preventing it from recovering its strength.

When to Call for Help

Contact a local wildlife rehabilitator only if you see:

- Visible injuries (bleeding, oiling, broken wings)
- Entanglement in fishing line or nets
- The loon stranded away from water (roads, dunes, or parking lots)



Local Contacts:

- Cape Hatteras National Seashore — (252) 473-2111
- Outer Banks Wildlife Shelter (Newport, NC) — (252) 240-1200

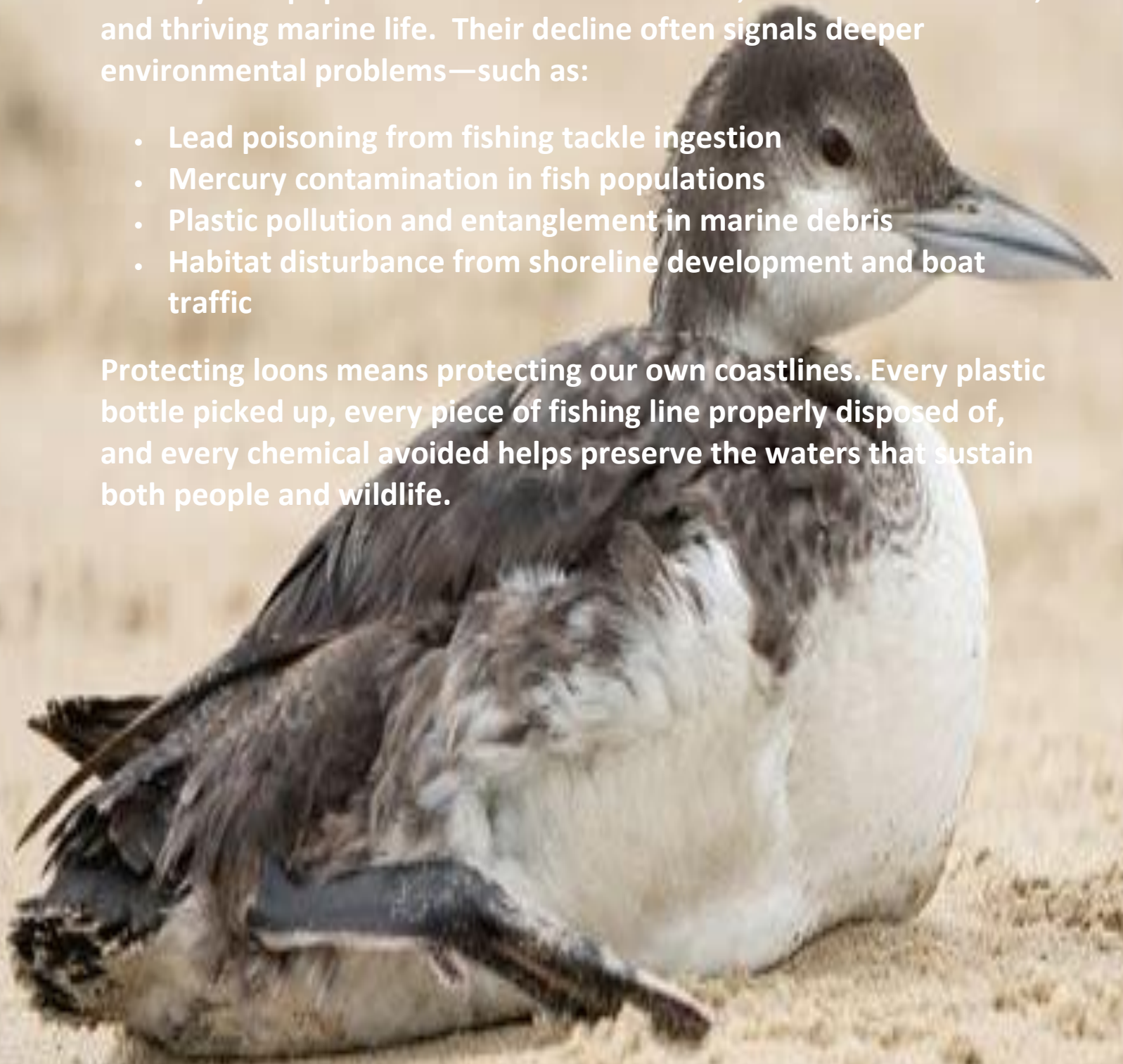


Indicators of Ecosystem Health

Healthy loon populations reflect clean waters, balanced food webs, and thriving marine life. Their decline often signals deeper environmental problems—such as:

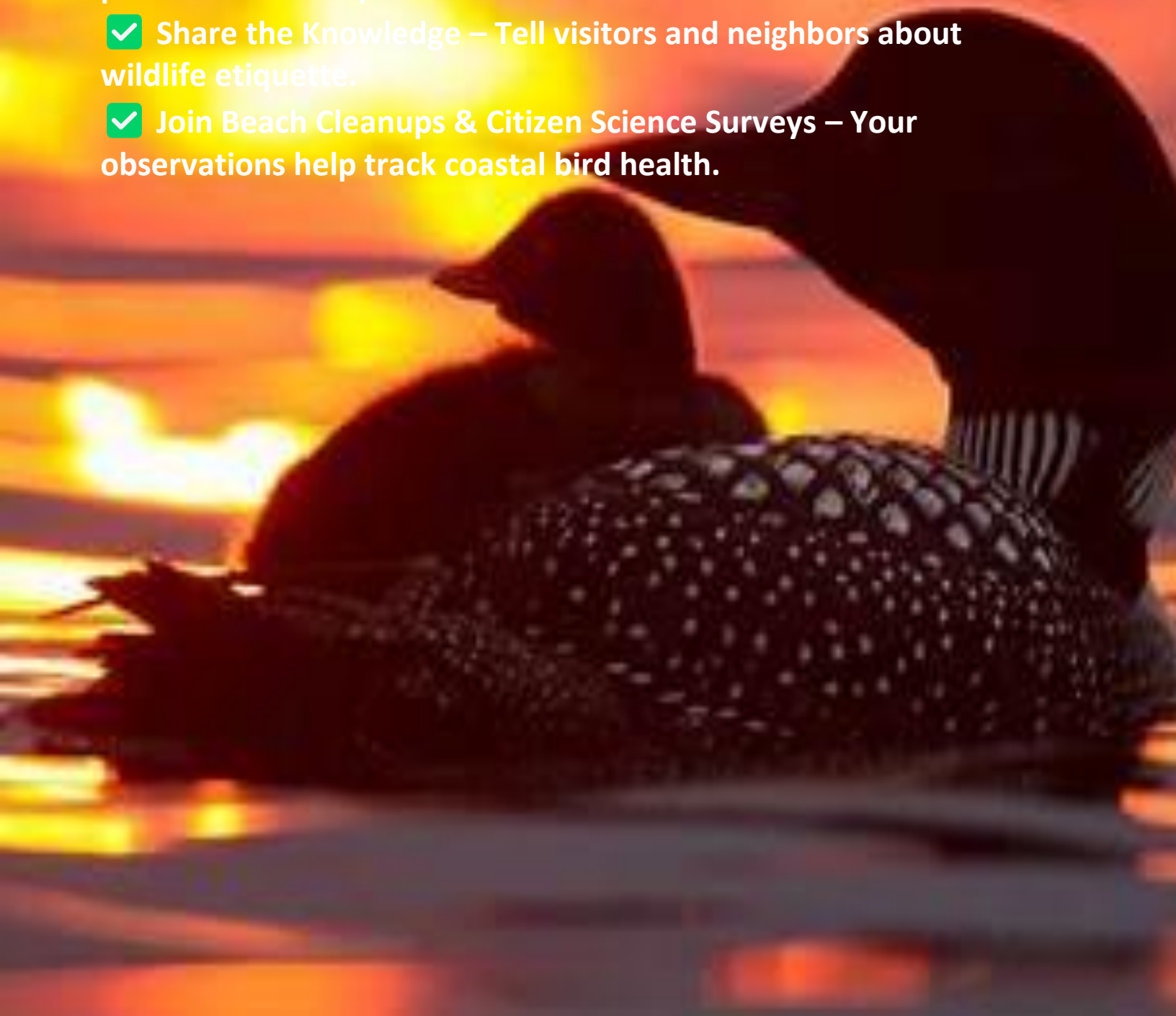
- Lead poisoning from fishing tackle ingestion
- Mercury contamination in fish populations
- Plastic pollution and entanglement in marine debris
- Habitat disturbance from shoreline development and boat traffic

Protecting loons means protecting our own coastlines. Every plastic bottle picked up, every piece of fishing line properly disposed of, and every chemical avoided helps preserve the waters that sustain both people and wildlife.



How You Can Help

- ✓ Give Wildlife Space – Stay at least 50 feet away from resting birds.
- ✓ Leash Pets on Beaches – Even friendly dogs can frighten loons or chase them into danger.
- ✓ Fish Responsibly – Retrieve lost lines, use non-lead sinkers, and recycle monofilament.
- ✓ Reduce Runoff – Choose organic fertilizers and native plants for coastal yards.
- ✓ Share the Knowledge – Tell visitors and neighbors about wildlife etiquette.
- ✓ Join Beach Cleanups & Citizen Science Surveys – Your observations help track coastal bird health.



Did You Know?

- Loons can dive over 200 feet deep and stay underwater for up to five minutes.
- During winter molt, they temporarily lose the ability to fly, which is why staying near the ocean is essential.
- The eerie “wail” and “yodel” calls heard on northern lakes are replaced by quieter grunts and hoots in winter.
- North Carolina is a key wintering site for both Common and Red-throated Loons—protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.



References

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