

To Speak for the Voice of the Wilderness, Tiffany Grade, Loon Preservation Committee

What is it that evokes, deep within our hearts and souls, wilderness and wildness? I'm sure we all have many answers to this question, but, for me, one of those things is the loon—the sight of a loon with its black and white plumage of spots, checks, stripes, its fiery red eye, unspeakably beautiful as it glides across a mirror calm lake; and the call of the loon, which reaches deep within the soul and stirs something we cannot even put into words. Many people have called it the voice of the wilderness, to the point that it may have become cliché, but stop and think for a minute what that means.

Close your eyes for a moment and let nature writer and conservationist Sigurd Olson take us there: “The canoe was drifting off the islands, and the time had come for the calling, that moment of magic in the north when all is quiet and the water still iridescent with the fading glow of sunset. Even the shores seemed hushed and waiting for that first lone call, and when it came, a single long-drawn mournful note, the quiet was deeper than before.”

I recall an evening I was out on Squam Lake, it was exactly the time of evening that Sigurd Olson wrote about; and, as darkness settled over the lake, the loons started calling, their voices echoing off the mountains surrounding the lake, filling the air. The music was achingly beautiful, a sound that opens us to the wild spirits and wild places that inhabit this planet, and creates a sacred space and moment where we connect to the earth and its creatures in a deep and profound way.

And yet the voice of the loon, so powerful and so profound, is strangely drowned out in the noise of humanity, silenced in our disregard for the lives of other creatures around us. And so, at the Loon Preservation Committee, we work to speak for the voice of the wilderness and do all we can to ensure it is not silenced from New Hampshire's waters. As sentinels of environmental quality, loons daily show us our intersection with the natural world and our impacts on it. And we have a choice to make: Will we live with the creatures and living things that share our planet and let them live? Or will we forever extinguish them from this earth?

The magic of loons has captivated me for as long as I can remember. I grew up in northern Wisconsin, and one of my earliest memories is being out on the lake where my parents had a cottage and my mom saying, “Look at the loon!” She made it clear to me from the beginning that loons were something really special, and I was hooked. At night we would awaken to their calls and the next morning we would say to each other, “Did you hear the loons?” At a much younger age than I probably should have, I would spend hours by myself in the canoe, watching the loons. I came to love all birds; but, for me, nothing could compare with the loons gliding through the morning mist, their calls echoing across the shoreline, taking me always to a wilder place and connecting me to this beautiful earth.

And so I dreamed of being a biologist and working to help protect the marvelous birds I watched from all the harms that humans can inflict on them. But life is strange, and roads that seem straight take detours. Fast forward nearly 20 years and you would find me in Europe, researching my doctoral dissertation to prepare for a career as a professor of medieval history.

But I was miserable and spent my nights reading Sigurd Olson to take me back to my beloved northern lakes and the calls of the loons.

As I pursued a career in medieval history, I saw birds and wilderness disappearing out of my life—and the challenges facing birds mounting. I realized my passion in life was to help birds, to work in bird conservation, to do my all to protect them against increasing human threats. So I made my decision: I would finish my doctorate and then start over. In my heart, I knew I had to try to make a difference for birds.

While pursuing my education in wildlife and conservation, I volunteered for 3 months for a macaw research and conservation project in the Peruvian Amazon at a remote research station. To be so far from any human imprint was a deeply profound experience, to be so embedded in the heart of wild nature. What does it mean to see the macaws and other wildlife living the lives they were meant to live, where wild nature rules, to see the macaws streaming up the river, the rising sun lighting their rainbow colors, to hear the cacophony of their raucous calls (yet another voice of the wilderness), to see nature and wildness essentially untouched by humans? For me, it stirred something deep in my soul about what wildness is, and the rights of other living things to **be** (in the deepest sense of the word). To this day, I cannot see wild macaws winging over the rainforest without tears coming to my eyes. But the fires this fall forced into the headlines what humans are doing to the myriad of life in the Amazon. How much longer will they and the Amazon survive?

A couple years after I started working for LPC, I came face to face with the heartbreaking reality of wild lives and wild spirits touched—and shattered—by people. We had been out one night doing routine banding work on Squam; but, the next morning, the blood test results showed that the male of the loon family we had captured had lethal levels of lead poisoning. The following week is forever seared into my memory, the glare of the spotlight flashing along the shore as every night we went out, trying to re-capture him, if anything could be done to save him, however remote the chance. But, having been captured once, he was onto us, and we could not catch him. A week later, the loon beached himself. We took the loon to a vet and an x-ray confirmed the presence of lead fishing tackle in his gizzard. We had no choice but to euthanize him.

To take the life of a wild animal...It was the only possible and only humane outcome and one that, sadly, I have had to do many times in the years since. To watch the red fire fade from their eyes, all because of humans, but human what? Are people just not aware? LPC is working to spread the word about using non-lead tackle as widely as possible, but we need everyone to help get the word out. Sadly, we know some people just refuse to change to non-lead tackle, but why? Selfishness? Arrogance? Greed? A disregard for the value of non-human life? All of the above?

After that loon's death, I threw myself into a study of loon mortality in New Hampshire, burying myself in necropsy reports, x-rays, stomach contents, any and all lines of evidence to build a case to re-evaluate New Hampshire's lead tackle laws. The size and type of tackle that killed this loon was still legal at the time—it was a loophole that needed to be closed. LPC had worked

hard a decade earlier to make New Hampshire the first state in the nation to restrict certain sizes and types of lead fishing tackle, but more needed to be done.

While doing this research, I found in the records a heartbreaking litany of all the ways people can and have harmed loons and taken their lives and still do—from lead fishing tackle to shooting them to boat collisions and more. My research found that nearly half of all adult loons collected dead in New Hampshire have died as a result of lead fishing tackle ingestion—so many loon voices silenced, and in the most terrible fashion. To make matters worse, over the years, mortality from lead fishing tackle has had a significant population-level effect on New Hampshire’s loon population, reducing it by over 40%.

So we had to speak, lest the voice of the wilderness be silenced. It seems strange and ironic that the most eloquent voice of the wilderness choir needs us to speak for it, however haltingly. But speak we did, and the work of LPC, along with a chorus of support from the public, resulted in a law passed in the legislature to close the loopholes that let that male loon on Squam—and so many others—die from lead poisoning.

But, heartbreakingly, loons continue to die from lead—I picked up another one on Squam just a month ago. So the work goes on, with lead and so much else: climate change, the spread of new diseases as a result of climate change, disturbance of nests and loon families by boaters and recreational users of the lakes, pressures of shoreline development, contaminants. On all of these, and so many more, we all must speak and act, lest the voice of the wilderness fall silent forever in New Hampshire.

Why do we live in such conflict with nature? Why do we not see the birds, the animals, the trees, the lichen as fellow voyagers with us on Planet Earth? As fellow living things who have a right, in and of themselves, to live the lives they were meant to live?

Ecologist E.O. Wilson has written about *biophilia*, a love of life and all living things that binds humanity to all other species on the planet. In realizing our interconnectedness with other living things, we must develop an ethic that includes not just humanity’s short-term wants but the good of a world so much greater than ourselves. As Aldo Leopold wrote, we must “Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” And as we develop this ethic, we learn to respect and love our fellow travelers on Earth.

We must coexist with nature. Wild spirits live among us, and we are privileged to share this planet with them. There are ways everyone can help make the world a better place for nature. A guiding philosophy of Loon Preservation Committee is that loons and people can live together and share the lakes, as long as people treat loons with a little respect. For so little—don’t use lead, reel your fishing line in when loons are nearby, keep a respectful distance—we have the privilege of seeing these incredible creatures live out their lives the way they were meant to. We all must do more as climate change threatens loons and so many other species, but we can all begin with meaningful and significant changes.

We are gifted with being in the presence of these wild spirits, to hear the voice of the wilderness, whatever that may be for you, and to encounter wildness every time we see or hear one of these wild spirits, to return to a truer sense of what it means to live on this earth with our fellow creatures, and a truer sense of who we are. In the presence of wildness, we learn to tread this earth with greater humility, to see that lives are unfolding all around us, if only we take the time to look and listen. We learn to live with empathy for those wild lives and for this planet.

From the great to the small, from sitting in the canopy of the rainforest at dawn literally watching the forest breathe as a new day breaks to hearing the unbridled cries of joy from a loon pair as they announce to the world that a new loon chick has hatched, there are lives unfolding around us. We only have to watch, to listen...and to speak for the wild voices that they may never be forever silenced and to ask ourselves, what can I do to ensure that all the wild things around us can live the lives they were meant to live? What will you do?