

Feature Photo...

Loon Bonding

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Camera: Nikon F5
Lens: 80-200/2.8 AF-S Nikkor, 1.4 TC
Flash: None used
Support: Handheld in Kayak
Film: Kodak Elitechrome 100
Exposure: Unrecorded
Filter(s): None used

Although I have titled this photo "Loon Bonding", this two-month-old loon chick is actually begging to be fed. It is fully capable of diving for fish itself, but why bother when your parent is still a soft touch? This moment came as the culmination of a long day with kayak and camera.

A planned one-day nature photography excursion began well before sunrise early September. Although my actual goal was to visit and photograph an eagle's nest in northern New Hampshire, this turned out to be a "Loon Day"-a day filled with paddling among loons-before I retired exhausted with a cooler full of exposed film.

I started the day at my favorite pond before sunrise, drifting with loon for 3 hours. I had decided to slightly delay my visit with the eagles up north, since I didn't want to miss the early light and loon congregations in a nearer lake. Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) tend to gather at sunrise, feed in a group, and then disperse. Early or late light is critically important for loon photography, not because of the warm, soft quality (which is, of course, a plus) but because of the angle of the light. If you don't capture the red of the eye of the loon, its black head looks eyeless and the image fails, except in rare instances. The red comes from light entering the eye and being reflected back. Unless the sun is low, the angles are wrong and the eye looks black.

My next stop was 150 miles north in Errol, NH. Putting in upstream of the dam, I kayaked 4 miles up the slow-moving Androscoggin River to some islands on Lake Umbagog where eagles nested. I couldn't get close enough to the eagles to get a decent photo, though I did get a good view of them and their young through binoculars. I relaxed in the shade on a small island for an hour or so then headed back.

The day was unusually warm and calm. Calm is a big plus when photographing from a kayak, not only because it helps steady the camera but also because it makes for less confusing water reflection backgrounds. Incidentally, in contrast to on land, I don't use a tripod in a canoe or kayak, even though many waterbird photographers recommend one. I've tried it, but find it too confining. It limits my shooting directions way too much. A monopod is the worst of the three options in my opinion. I've captured some nice shots while twisting nearly backwards handholding the camera that would have been impossible with a tripod. Go on calm days and steady your camera using good handholding techniques and, if you have them, IS/VR lenses.

On the way downriver I "befriended" a mother and two-month-old loon. I know the age of the loon because I know when they emerge from their eggs in this part of the world. I must have spent 2 hours floating silently nearby as they interacted, acting pretty oblivious to my presence. At one point they came very close to my drifting kayak while the chick begged for food. I squeezed the trigger... It's a real treat when wild creatures accept you in their world.

JB-NPN 273

Editor's Note - Jim Block is a full-time stock photographer, writer, photography teacher, and workshop and tour leader. He specializes in nature and garden stock photography and contributes regularly to several horticultural magazine and book publishers. Fifteen of his photos have appeared on book, magazine, and calendar covers. Two single-photographer calendars have been published nationally by a gardening book publisher based on 31 of his images. Jim also leads small-group photo tours and workshops in Northern New England. He may be contacted at jab@valley.net.

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