

Man Versus Loon

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Two hundred yards from shore, around the lee of the larger island, I first took note of the mother loon. They're retiring, generally. A boat approaches and loons dive, disappearing for thirty seconds or more, and then up they pop a hundred yards off, sometimes letting out a throaty trill to celebrate their escape.

It wasn't my intention to get close. I was just swimming, heading back from a lap around the nearer of two small islands in the shallow northern end of Raymond Pond. She was floating about fifty yards away with her two fledglings—loonies perhaps—and she seemed unbothered by my presence as I slid through the dark water toward shore. Suddenly, she let out a howl, which seems an awful vulgar word for a loon's cry, for in the late hours, in the yellow glow of the fireside, the loon's song reverberates across these gentle waters like a plaintive ghost answering a she-wolf's cry. But this was a howl, and it preceded a dive, which I expected would precede the mother loon's popping up another hundred yards away, goading her children to escape the perceived danger. But the baby loons didn't dive.

I stopped swimming, curious to see where the mother loon would surface. I was treading water in a depth of probably twenty feet, through a long moment of calm and silence. No waves and no wind. Just the pleasant summer air.

The loon exploded out of the pond in front of me in an eruption of sound and water, her wings spread, her feathers pricked-up on end, her webbed feet and wings slapping the water furiously as she skated across the surface of the pond, circling me in a wide frantic arc, screeching and barking her way around me.

Several realities materialized all in the same instant as I was confronted by this animal. The first was that I felt no fear, and it might seem odd to think of a man having anything to fear from a loon, but having been there, I would think no less of anyone confessing it under similar circumstances. I also knew that I was helpless to decide the outcome of the situation. Though I am a strong swimmer, no man is in his element in the water, and this water fowl was running across the surface of the pond, circling me nearly as fast as I could run on land. It was the loon's decision whether there would be a fight, and I had no idea what she would decide. I also knew that my head was above the water. It may seem a strange thing to think, but when confronted by an animal in an attacking posture, one becomes aware of his vulnerabilities – the things he must protect – and he sizes up the threat fast.

I'd never seen a loon this close. What struck me was the size of the bird, which I'd always thought of as little more than a sharp-billed, black-and-white duck. But this was no duck. Its body was the size of a small dog, perhaps a beagle, but I was surprised most by the thickness of its broad neck, which, though not nearly as long, was easily thicker than a swan's throat. Truly though, I kept my eyes pinned on her menacing black beak, which was five inches long at least

and tapered to a rapier-sharp point—the perfect weapon for pecking out human eyeballs.

She slapped the water, circling three or four times before stopping to hiss and smack the pond's surface with her wings again. She was making that decision—the calculation: is it worth the risk to fight, or is the chance of a lost battle too great to bear?

As she postured in front of me, I knew I would win the fight. I believed this beyond any doubt. Had she attacked, I'd have snatched her neck and cracked it in half like a lobster shell. A split-second of sudden violence that would have been regrettable, but necessary. I was not losing one of my eyeballs to a bird. No second-guessing, just certainty.

What the loon knew, I cannot say. Perhaps she perceived my confidence and sensed the danger of attacking a much larger, stronger, more violent animal. Perhaps she simply realized I was far too lumbering and awkward a water beast to pose any threat to her fledglings. She flapped her wings once more and then dove in retreat, disappearing and then popping up again beside her two little loonies fifty yards away.

That evening by the campfire, I heard her sonorous cry echoing off the waters of Raymond Pond from a mile away, perhaps as soothing a sound as any in the natural world—the longing siren song of the Maine woods. I had never been happier to hear it.