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Reckless Parenting with a Purpose

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Reckless parenting with a purpose

The “social gatherings” of common loons (*Gavia immer*) have long been a distinctive but poorly understood feature of their breeding ecology (*Hydrobiologia* 2006; <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10750-006-0044-0>). During July and August, intruding adults of this iconic northern species fly into territories of breeding pairs. The intruders and pair members then engage in stereotyped circling behavior for up to an hour before the visitors depart. Meanwhile, any chicks of the pair hide among clumps of vegetation near shore. At last, long-term marking of loons in northern Wisconsin has clarified such events. We now recognize that social gatherings are motley assemblages of adults with widely divergent evolutionary interests. These five loons on Muskellunge Lake, for example, include a female and male from Muskellunge (middle and right-most, respectively) who have chicks, and a young female “floater” (left-most, in background) who is scouting for a territory with chicks (an indicator of territory quality) so that she may later return to evict the female pair member (*Anim Behav* 2000; <https://doi.org/10.1006/anbe.1999.1295>). The second and fourth adults pictured, however, are the most intriguing visitors: they are a breeding pair from neighboring Clear Lake that have temporarily abandoned their chicks. Why engage in such seemingly reckless parenting? Perhaps by landing on Muskellunge, the Clear pair can

induce local floaters to also land at Muskellunge, where they are likely to spot the Muskellunge pair’s chicks. If so, floaters will return to evict the Muskellunge pair, and the Clear pair will have exploited the loon floaters’ system of social information to decrease the likelihood that they themselves will be evicted from their home lake.



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