

LOON CHICKS

The following is an excerpt from my last book, Loons, Ospreys and Grebes (available from me)

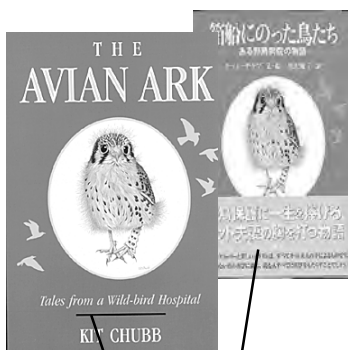
The hatchling has a pure white belly and a coat of fine black down for the first two weeks, and the five we have had weighed from 85g to 110g, similar to others in the wild. Only hours after hatching, they begin preening, and the parents soon move them from the nest to a shallow, protected nursery site. After about two weeks, this black fuzziness is replaced with bigger brown fluff for another two weeks before the flight-feathers begin to push out.

Unfortunately, small chicks are sometimes naively taken from the wild. Four of ours came from people who found them near the nest, wrongly assuming them to be abandoned and “rescuing” them, in two cases even peeling away the eggshell, a shocking and irresponsible intrusion. No doubt they did not know that loon chicks peep in the shell as early as four days before they hatch, and that those two eggs—loons only lay two eggs—hatch at different times, usually between 8 to 24 hours but as long as 52 hours apart and that the chick needs no help from parent or human to exit—and unless moribund, will emerge when its time is right.

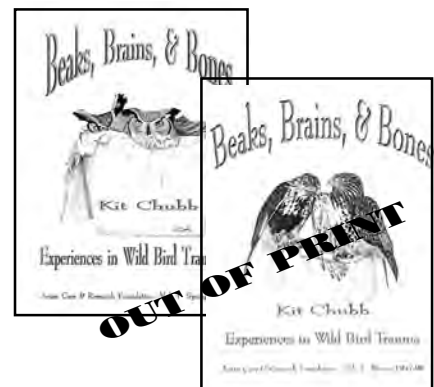
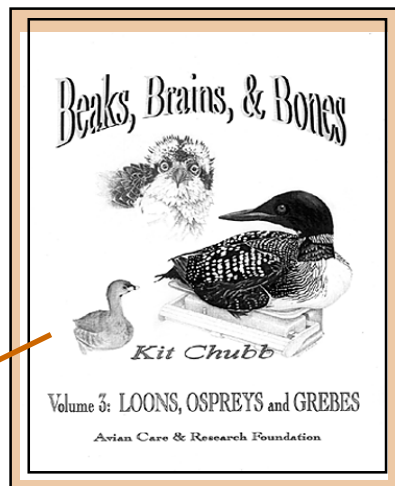
Only hours after hatching, the chick or chicks are moved to a shallow, protected “nursery” waterside site so the adults can leave to go fishing. When discovered accidentally, they must be left alone. DO NOT “RESCUE” THEM. They are NOT abandoned. Their parents are fully in charge

Of those peeled, one died soon while the other survived with us for a few days because the “peeler” adamantly refused to return it to its nest located on an island in a nudist colony, which rather wilted my desire to rush the chick back myself (what *does* one wear?) While I tried to find suitable wild fosters the hatchling deteriorated, for the shock of such a jagged, premature birth must have been severe and our attempted care completely inadequate. *If you are not a loon, you can't do it.*

Two other hatchlings were dying of injuries when we received them; one had been hit on the head by a boat (witnessed) the other bitten from below and was eviscerating, perhaps attacked by a non-parental adult loon, a turtle, or even a fish; in fish-processing plants, loon chick remains have been identified in the bellies of large northern pike. Statistics put the average family size at 1.5 chicks or less a year—many die or are preyed on, and not even every healthy chick will survive. But that is no rationale for interfering when a chick is found. The urgency is that the chick, if healthy, is immediately returned to the site of origin; or to his parents, or even (ocasionally) a foster family. See following story.



available



SUCCESSFUL RETURN OF A LOON CHICK



In eastern Ontario summer 1997, a lock-keeper found a chick paddling beside the lock gate just as a large motorboat was to be let out. To prevent the chick from being sucked under the gate by the inflow, the lock-keeper scooped it up and passed it to the boaters, one of whom telephoned me.

As returning it promptly to the site where it had been found (nearly always the wisest thing to do) was thought too hazardous, I asked the caller to quickly return the chick to the parents, describing the best way I know, which is to approach the parents by boat and toss the chick at them. While tossing babies frisbee-fashion is against human nature, loon chicks are so fluffy and buoyant that they pop down like a cork on the waves and are taken into the parental fold without comment.

So with the peeping chick on a lap, the friends motored out toward a loon family, one (the female) with a back-riding chick. When, at a respectful distance the engine was silenced, they were all surprised to see the other adult loon head straight for them until it was right beside the boat, within touching distance of an outstretched hand: this adult had responded to the call of the chick. The lady hurriedly set the chick in the water beside the boat, but it slid under the back platform, unseen by the adult. With difficulty she retrieved the chick, and this time took courage and tossed it a short distance into the view of the adult, who approached the chick, and together they turned their backs and paddled away to join the rest of the family.

All four were seen together on subsequent days.



Kit Chubb

parents don't abandon. People misinterpret