

Loon alert

By Nate Smelle

Snorkeling around the shoreline of one of L'Amable's many lakes last summer, I accidentally finned my way into a pretty sketchy predicament. By no means was this a planned swim into the danger zone. My true intentions that day were in fact rather harmless. My goal, to tip back my last three lime coolers and test out a new underwater camera on a few largemouth bass I had been swimming with the day before. Walking down to the water, I could feel the heat radiating off the rocks as they massaged my feet. Sitting down at the water's edge, I put on my fins, pulled down my mask and slipped beneath the surface with barely a sound. The day up until that point was one of those rare doses of perfection, where everything including the weather fall into place. Within a few moments of entering the water, I was already swimming with my fishy friends that I was hoping to cross paths with. The sun was penetrating into the depths below me, the new camera was working beautifully, and there was pizza and my last lime cooler waiting for me on shore. Stuck in my head as I circled the lake was Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*.

With the cool lake water preventing me from feeling the sun burning my shoulders, I kicked my way up and down the shoreline for what I later discovered was more than three hours. Treading water, I peered across the lake searching for something new to explore. Noticing a small rocky island decorated with a couple of small trees about 100-metres out and a couple hundred metres to my west, I decided to check it out.

Tired, but not exhausted I let my curiosity propel me forward. Circling the island, I dove down between the rocks, to see if I could catch a glimpse of the bottom. The water was crystal clear, but the bottom was nowhere in sight. The fish here were much larger than the ones following me along the shoreline. Equally as interested in me as I was in them, I remained still and filmed them for as long as I could hold my breath.

Just as I was about to power down my camera I heard a loud splash in the water beside me. Still rolling, I turned towards the sound and saw the underbelly of a common loon paddling between me and the island. Did it see me? I certainly couldn't miss it. As I approached it slowly, it approached me at a much quicker pace. Raising my head out of the water, the massive bird did the same and let out a terrifying wail. From a distance, I would describe this call as hauntingly beautiful. From less than 10 feet away when you are treading water above unknown depths, it is terrifying.

Standing up on the water as if it were about to take off, it stretched out its wings and let out another scream as it ran across the surface in my direction. Stopping short about five feet in front of me I could see that the massive bird's wings spanned at least four feet, and its beak was nearly a foot long. This thing could do some damage, I thought to myself as I realized the peaceful trance I had lulled myself into was long gone.

Turning its back on me for a second, I frantically tried to swim to the island. Of course, the loon ? much quicker than me ? followed close behind. Slapping its wings on the surface and striking at my heels with its beak it chased me onto the slippery rocks. Clawing at the smooth stone in an attempt to pull myself out of the water, I tore off almost every one of my fingernails and ripped a two-inch long gash in my right knee. Feeling the sun hit my skin as I crawled onto the rock, I laid there exhausted, appreciating my temporary sanctuary.

Gazing back towards the rock where I had first jumped in, I could see a sign bobbing in the water between myself and where I needed to be. It read, ?LOON ALERT: Help keep this lake safe for wildlife, Enjoy wildlife at a distance.? Focused on the fish and the depths below I must have swam right past it. Nor did I see a sign back on the mainland. Nevertheless, there I was, all alone on Loon Island with an angry mama loon and at least 100 metres between me and safety. Walking 10 steps to the other side of the rock, the loon swam the long way around the island to continue keeping an eye on me.

This was my chance to make a break for it.

Stepping into my fins and throwing on my mask, I quietly slid back into the lake and swam faster than I ever had before with my eyes focused on my destination. Again, following close behind the loon was hot on my trail. Refusing to look back again, I gave it all I had. Once I had passed the halfway mark, I heard the loon's call fade. Now able to touch bottom, I took a quick peek and noticed it had turned around to head back to its nesting site. Back on land, I dropped to ground to kiss the sand and catch my breath. Walking back to where I had stashed my cooler bag, I saw another sign pinned to a tree that read, ?LOON ALERT: Nesting site, Do not disturb.?

Though the sign could not be seen from the path leading me to the lake, next time around I will be more careful to pay attention to my surroundings.