

## Lake Erie's small but toxic killers

For the third straight fall, hundreds of dead loons and other waterbirds have been washing up along the Lake Erie shoreline. Jeff Robinson, a field biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada, estimates that between 300 and 500 loon corpses have turned up on Ontario beaches at the eastern end of the lake in the past few weeks. Across the lake, New York state officials have picked up at least 150 loon bodies along that state's Lake Erie shore. On both sides of the border, large numbers of mergansers, cormorants and gulls have been dying as well.

The cause? Robinson and other scientists point the finger at two invasive species introduced to the Great Lakes from the ballast water of Eastern European ships. Loons and other fish-eating birds, they believe, have been poisoned by eating round gobies infected with botulism. Those small fish have become the most abundant species at the eastern end of the lake since first turning up in large numbers during the 1990s. Gobies, in turn, feed heavily on another foreign invader, zebra mussels, which do an excellent job of filtering toxins out of water but may be concentrating naturally occurring botulism spores, among other contaminants, in their bodies. "Gobies," says Robinson, "are becoming little poison pills."

New York authorities have devoted resources to the problem, logging 583 dead loons in November and December last year. "Looks like there will be more this year," says Bill Culligan, a fisheries scientist at the New York department of environmental conservation. But there is still no comprehensive effort to determine the extent of the problem on the Canadian side or in Lake Erie as a



The loons are dying in 'unprecedented' numbers, says Timmermans

Peter Benge/Maclean's

whole. "It's an unprecedented die-off," says Steve Timmermans, aquatic surveys scientist with Bird Studies Canada, a non-profit conservation group. "We need a beach survey to find out how many are dying."

Canada's loon population has appeared to be stable—"as far as we know," adds Timmermans. A

1996 Canadian Lakes Loon Survey estimated there were between 250,000 and 500,000 of the birds across Canada, including 97,000 breeding pairs in Ontario. But that was before the Lake Erie problem developed. What makes it especially threatening is that loons that spend their summers across a vast swath of Canada

rest and feed each fall on lakes Huron, Erie and Ontario before heading south in December. They are thinly spread in their summer habitats, often with just one or two pairs on a lake. The Lake Erie die-off could leave cottagers on more Canadian lakes without the haunting call of the loon next spring.

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