



THE LURE OF THE COMMON LOON

JOE RICKETTS PLEDGES \$6.5 MILLION TO SAVE AN ICON OF THE NORTHERN LAKES.

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The call of the common loon is one of the most beautifully haunting sounds in North America. The bird's iconic wail (to hear it, click the play button above), is used by mated pairs to keep track of one another in their breeding grounds along the shores of pristine northern lakes. This week the loon's call brought forth an unexpected answer from the deep pockets of a controversial American billionaire. On Wednesday, the Ricketts Conservation Foundation awarded a \$6.5 million grant to the Maine-based Biodiversity Research Institute (BRI) for research projects aimed at saving the loon.

It's an unusual award from a surprising source.

“This is the largest award ever given toward loon conservation and research,” BRI founder and executive director Dave Evers told me earlier this week, prior to the official announcement. “It’s big enough to allow us to conduct new research, strengthen existing populations, and restore loons to places where they’ve been lost over the past century.”

Loon populations have been declining significantly throughout their core range—mostly Canada and the northern tier of the United States—over the past 20 years, due in large part to mercury poisoning, acid rain, lead, and the rise of botulism in the Great Lakes region. Common loons are endangered in Vermont, threatened in New Hampshire and Michigan, and a species of special concern in New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

The man behind the money, Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts, is a new arrival to the world of conservation funding. He’s better known as a major Republican donor whose candidates are proud low-rankers on conservation voters scorecards, including Sen. Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) and Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.). He spent \$10 million last year trying to defeat President Obama, and his conservative Super PAC, the Ending Spending Action Fund, last year funneled millions to Republican candidates who “favor enhancing free enterprise, reducing the size of government, and balancing our nation’s budget.”

So how’d he end up giving \$6.5 million to a bunch of loon researchers?

Ricketts is a man of eclectic passions. In recent years he’s invested part of his billion-dollar fortune in bison ranches and a film production unit (the American Film Company) dedicated to creating movies based on American history. Though not a baseball fan, the Ricketts’ family trust bought the Chicago Cubs in 2009 because his kids were Cubs fans and Ricketts saw it as a safe investment—“like buying a Picasso,” he’s reported as saying in a 2012 *Fortune* profile.

Add loons to that collection of passions. “I’ve had the idea of starting a conservation foundation for many years,” Ricketts said in a video interview taped recently at his Wyoming ranch. (The billionaire is notoriously media-shy. The video was released as part of the announcement this week by BRI officials.) When he looked around for a species on which to concentrate, “loons were the answer to my thoughts,” he said. “Because loons on our lakes and streams are similar to the canary in a mine.”

In other words, the fish-eating bird is a good indicator species. That’s due to its long lifespan and its place on top of the food chain. When contaminants and toxins threaten lakes, the damage often shows up first in the local loon population.

A recent 32-year study of loons conducted by Bird Studies Canada found a strong connection between acid rain, mercury levels, and depressed loon reproduction in lakes across eastern Canada. Acid rain, caused by industrial emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, gradually lowers the pH level of lake water. That reduces fish populations, a major food for loons. Airborne mercury emitted by coal-fired power plants in North America and China falls

into the lakes and settles in the bottom sediments. Bacteria in the lake transform it into methylmercury, an organic neurotoxin, which then moves up the food chain. At the top sits the loon.

“It’s a subtle effect,” said BRI’s Evers, who has studied loons and mercury levels for more than 20 years. “It affects the bird’s productivity over time.” In one recent study, Evers and Nina Schoch, of the Wildlife Conservation Foundation, found that loons with elevated levels of mercury produced one-third to one-half as many chicks as healthy loons. Mercury also leaves adult loons lethargic, which renders both adults and their chicks more vulnerable to predators.

One not-so-subtle effect hits loons that nest around the Great Lakes. Joe Kaplan, a former BRI scientist who now directs Common Coast, a research and conservation organization in northern Michigan, currently studies the spread of botulism among loon populations along Lake Michigan. The deadly biotoxin had been largely eradicated from the Great Lakes in the early 1980s. It returned to Lake Huron in 1999, and then spread to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. By 2006 it had reached Lake Michigan, carried by invasive zebra mussels and quagga mussels. Since 1999, botulism outbreaks have claimed more than 100,000 waterbirds in the region. Hardest hit are common loons, white-winged scoters, horned grebes, and long-tailed ducks. “Last year we had at least 3,000 dead loons,” Kaplan said. “And 99 percent were adults, which means it’s reducing the population size.”

Kaplan, Evers, and others who work with loons were buoyant about this week’s announcement of the Ricketts grant. “It’s a shot in the arm for the species,” said Kaplan, who partners with Michigan Audubon on a Loon Network to promote conservation of the species in the region. BRI director Dave Evers said the money will provide researchers with “the means to tackle some of these stressors, like mercury, acid rain, and botulism, that are out there causing problems.”

For Joe Ricketts, funding the loon research is a way to make the invisible become seen. “If we’re polluting our lakes to the point where we’re killing the loons,” he said, “it’s a wake-up call to us as human beings, that we’re causing more damage to our environment than we think we are—and we can’t see it except through a bird like the loon.”