

Rancher-philanthropist steps in to study loons

*By Mike Koshmrl, Jackson Hole, Wyoming
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A small population of common loons in northwestern Wyoming is dwindling, and no one is quite sure why.

The Ricketts Conservation Foundation has stepped in with a \$6.5 million grant to study why loons seem to be disappearing. Funds will go toward conducting a common loon census as well as restoring populations of the iconic, fish-eating bird.

"The money will first go to doing a big survey of six different states, of which Wyoming is one, to see how many birds are left," said Allan Mayer, director of Ricketts Foundation media representative 42West. "Once that is established, then they're going to start trying to re-establish the birds in places where they used to be."

The grant, announced Wednesday in Bondurant, was awarded to Maine-based Biodiversity Research Institute.

Considered a species that is indicative of larger ecosystem health, loons are susceptible to type E botulism, acid rain, mercury pollution and lead poisoning.

Breeding adult loons have red eyes, a black head, white underparts and a checkered black-and-white mantle. Adults can range from 24 to 39 inches long with a 4 to 5-foot wingspan.

Maps of loon distribution across North America show the Wyoming population is truly isolated. The nearest breeding range for the bird is more than 100 miles away in the northwestern corner of Montana.

The loon census, scheduled to be counted over five years, started in 2012. The nonprofit's efforts already are benefiting Yellowstone National Park biologists' understanding of the park's loons, Mayer said.

"They never have had the time or the resources to really survey the nesting situation in the park," he said. "Already, guys with the survey have found way more than they knew were there."

Biologists with the Wyoming Loon Working Group — comprised of Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, U.S. Forest Service and Biodiversity Research Institute officials — have identified just 14 loon pairs living in northwestern Wyoming.

TD Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts is paying for the research. A Sublette County ranch owner, Ricketts donated cash to buy out 58,000 acres of natural gas leases in the Bridger-Teton National Forest south of Jackson last January. Along with financing the conservation foundation, Ricketts' fortune has paid for an education foundation. The family also owns a 95 percent interest in Wrigley Field and the Chicago Cubs.