

# FINDING FAMILY

The Duckling Raised by Loons



Laura Purdie Salas

illustrated by Alexandria Neonakis

For Vicki and Steve Palmquist, the Game Knights,  
and my entire KidLit family –L.P.S.

For Lena, perfect little duckling –A.N.

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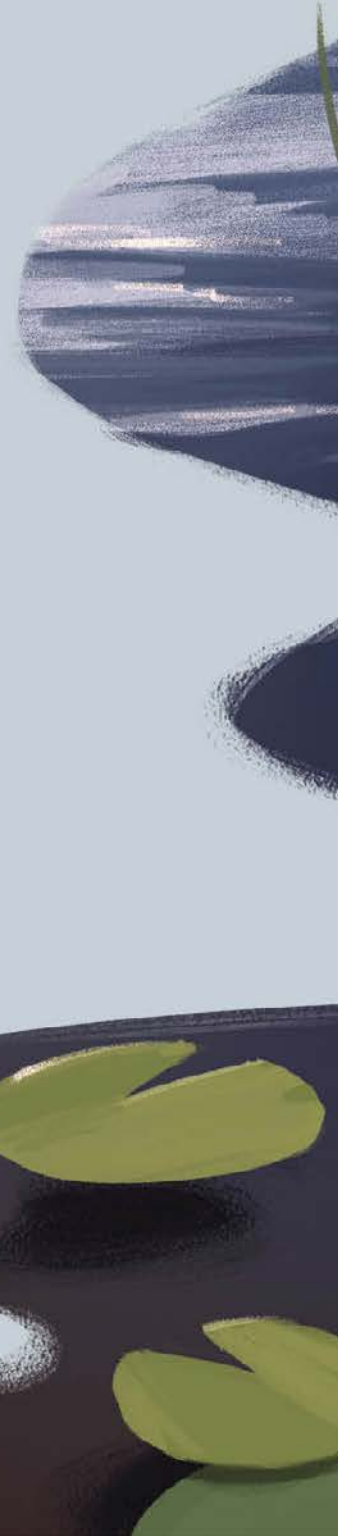
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## IS THIS STORY TRUE?

In May 2019, a pair of loons nested at the edge of a Wisconsin lake. That lake was part of the Loon Project. Director Walter Piper and his research assistants count, tag, and observe loons each summer in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. Researchers from the Loon Project carefully record data on the number of loons they see, what sounds they hear, which feeding behaviors they observe, and more.

On a windy, stormy June day, a research assistant who had never seen baby loons before checked on the new family. Afterward, she commented that loon chicks look an awful lot like ducklings. Ten days later, another researcher visited the lake and was astonished to realize that the loons were caring for a duckling, *not* a loon chick!

Piper was also amazed. There was only one other documented case of loons adopting a mallard duckling. “Loons invariably try and drive off mallards . . . they’re kind of enemies,” he told the National Audubon Society. But these loons were nurturing the duckling instead.

We don’t know exactly how the family formed, but Piper speculated that the loons probably lost their chicks to predators. With their parenting hormones at high levels, the adult loons would have been predisposed to care for anything resembling a baby loon. Enter the duckling. There were mallard families on the lake, but nobody knows how this duckling got separated from its own family. We just know the loons and the duckling found each other.

Researchers observed the family twenty-one times over the summer, and they shared their observations on the Loon Project’s website. Readers were charmed by the story and photos, and soon reporters approached the researchers. News stories about the family appeared in magazines and newspapers, and everyone wanted to meet these celebrity waterbirds. The Loon Project released a false lake name to protect the family from news teams and bird-watchers.

On August 19, a researcher observed the family for the last time. Loons and mallards migrate in late summer and early autumn, and by September 4, all three birds were gone. What happened to the duckling? Did it join other mallards that were migrating to the southern United States? Did it join young loons in the

Atlantic Ocean? The Loon Project website has the only answer: “As scientists, we commonly use the very powerful words: ‘we do not know.’”

Maybe its unknown ending makes this story even *more* worth telling. In life, we don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. All we know, and all we have power over, is right now.

This is a true story of the “right now” of

one summer, when two rival species became a single family in the Northwoods wilderness. I relied extensively on research notes and photos from the Loon Project (which correspond to the dates in the story). Those notes, combined with weather databases, expert sources on loon and mallard behaviors, and the kind assistance of Walter Piper and his team, ensured that the story of this surprising family is all fact.



Duckling and her loon parents on July 2, 2019

# THE INTRUDER

Why was it a big deal when the duckling didn't hide from the intruder loon? Because loons are very territorial, and a good lake is highly valued. The duckling's actions put her family's territory at risk.

In July and August, single loons with no mate search for mates and good breeding lakes. When they spot a pair of loons with a chick, they know the lake is a desirable one, full of delicious fish and invertebrates. A single loon might battle the same-gender loon parent, kick it off the lake, and take over its family. Or it might kill the loon chicks. Or it might just note the lake's location and return to claim the territory the following spring.

It's no surprise that loon parents try to escape the notice of single loons. When one flies overhead, loon

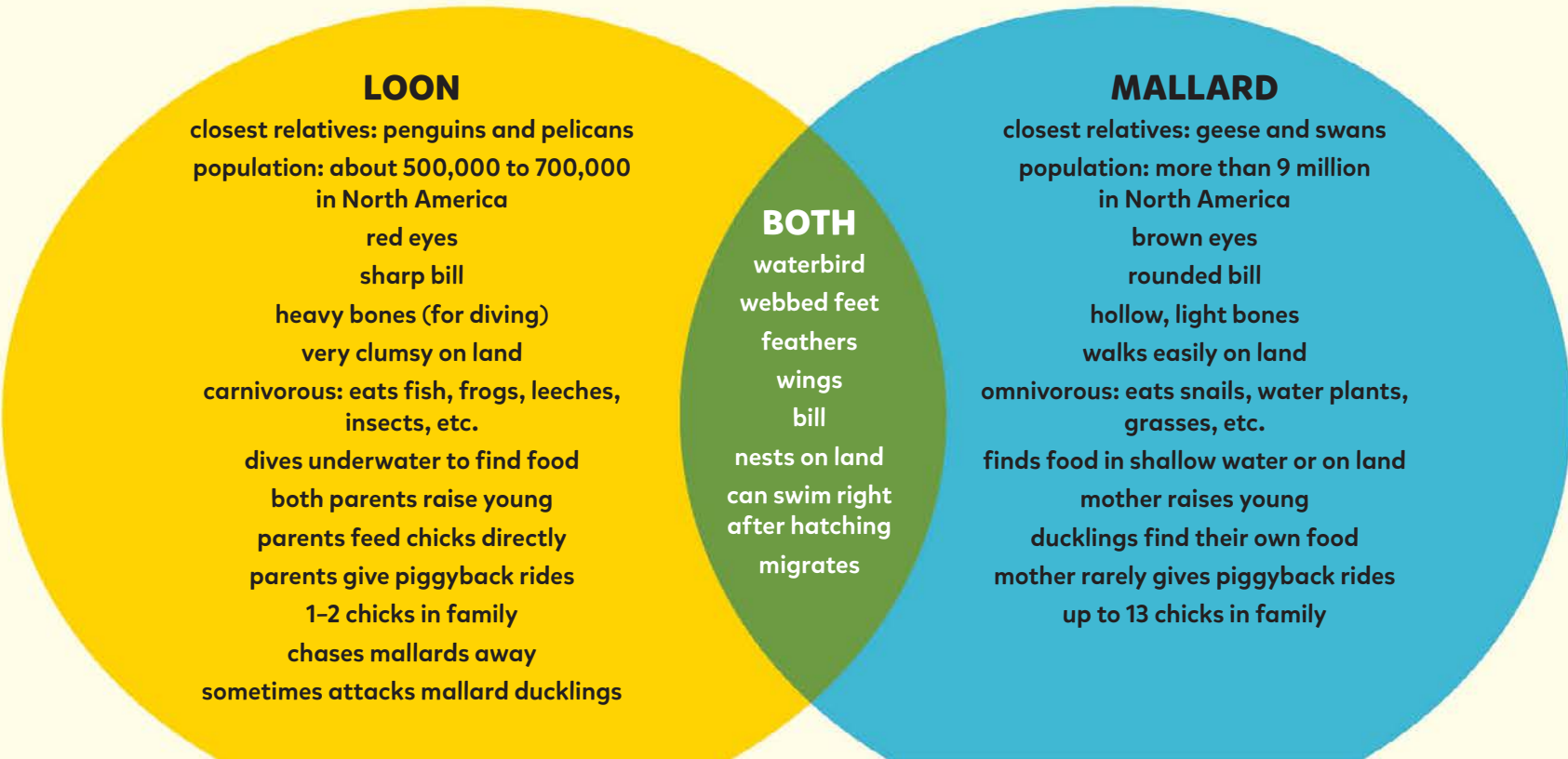
parents go to the middle of the lake, where they pretend to be chickless. Meanwhile, loon chicks hide near the shoreline. These actions proclaim, "No chicks here! This lake is not worth stealing!"

But the duckling didn't hide. Instead, says Piper, it "raced towards [the] middle of the lake, while peeping loudly, making itself very obvious." Luckily, the baffled intruder flew away. But even though the intruder would know the duckling wasn't a loon chick, the parents' protective behavior might still have sent a signal: "This lake is great for a loon family. Come back next year to steal it!" Because loon pairs often return to the same lake year after year, losing their lake would jeopardize their own ability to hatch chicks the following year.

# VERY DIFFERENT BIRDS

Common loons and mallard ducks are two North American waterbirds that are very different from each other. In fact, the most recent common ancestor of loons and ducks lived about ninety million years ago. Maybe you've never seen a common loon. They spend summers in the wilderness lakes of the far north and winters along North American coastlines. Mallard ducks, however, are truly common across North America. If you see a duck on a lake or a river, there's a good chance it's a mallard.

Loons and mallards also differ in anatomy and behavior. These distinctions make this loon-mallard family truly astonishing.



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## FURTHER READING

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Buckley, Carol. *Tarra & Bella: The Elephant and Dog Who Became Best Friends*. New York: Puffin, 2014.

The true story of a retired circus elephant that makes no friends in the elephant sanctuary—until she meets a stray dog. Includes photos.

The Loon Project

<https://loonproject.org/>

Find factual information about loons as well as updates on loon research carried out in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Pearson, Yvonne. *Little Loon Finds His Voice*. Oakland, CA: The Collective Book Studio, 2021.

In this fictional picture book, a young loon wants to learn to emulate his papa’s long, strong calls.

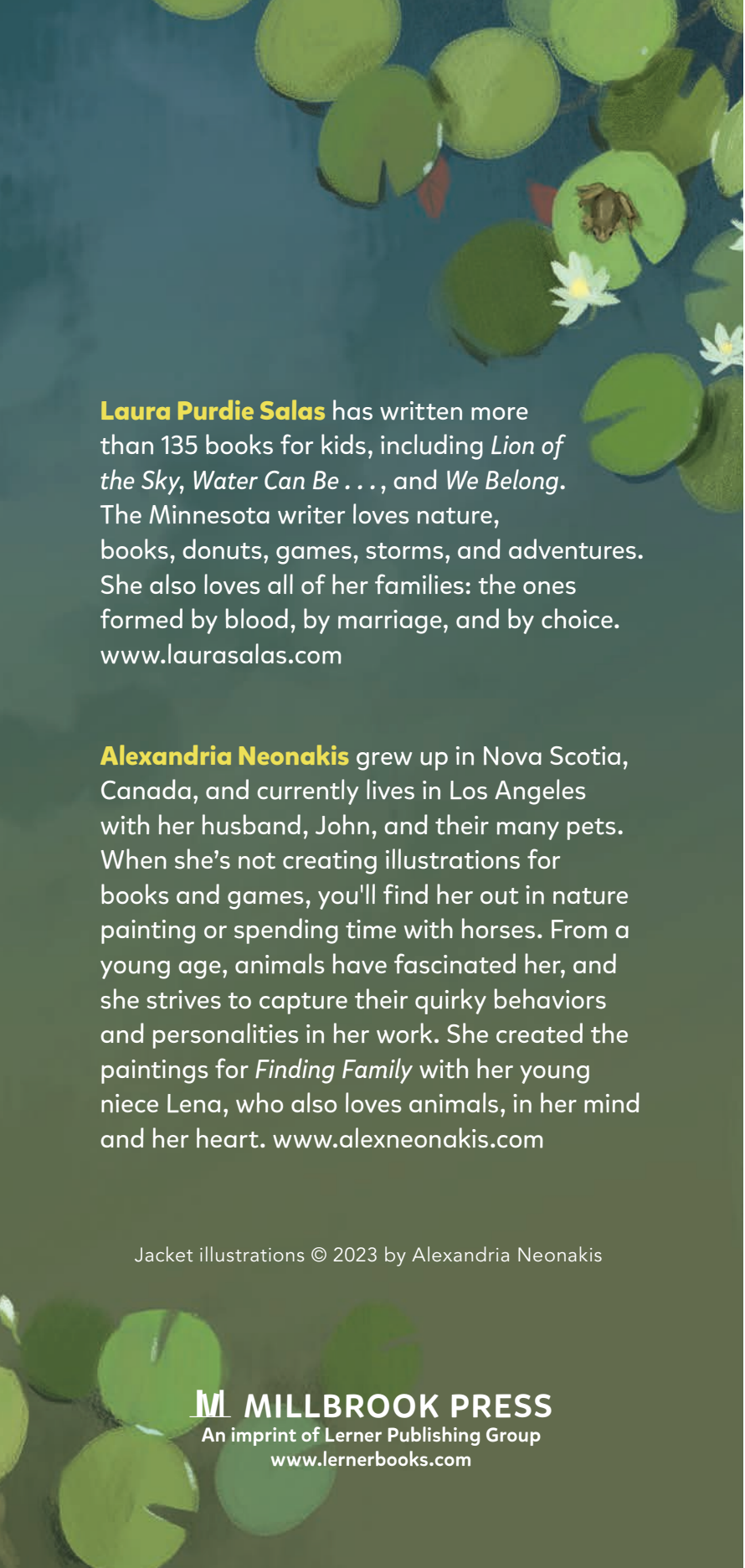
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A loon chick learns it has all the skills to be independent in this rhyming story based on accurate loon development.

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**Laura Purdie Salas** has written more than 135 books for kids, including *Lion of the Sky*, *Water Can Be . . .*, and *We Belong*. The Minnesota writer loves nature, books, donuts, games, storms, and adventures. She also loves all of her families: the ones formed by blood, by marriage, and by choice. [www.laurasalas.com](http://www.laurasalas.com)

**Alexandria Neonakis** grew up in Nova Scotia, Canada, and currently lives in Los Angeles with her husband, John, and their many pets. When she's not creating illustrations for books and games, you'll find her out in nature painting or spending time with horses. From a young age, animals have fascinated her, and she strives to capture their quirky behaviors and personalities in her work. She created the paintings for *Finding Family* with her young niece Lena, who also loves animals, in her mind and her heart. [www.alexneonakis.com](http://www.alexneonakis.com)

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