

Monticello Trumpeter Swans – Nature’s elegant gift

Text and photos by Carol Baker.

Recently when I visited the Swan-Viewing area in Monticello, I was greeted by a friendly couple, snuggled deep into their parkas, blowing steam from mugs of hot coffee. They were enjoying the scene on the river and were comfortable despite the chilly day. The main attraction on the river was, of course, the trumpeter swans. They seemed to be comfortable, too.

But our treasured friends didn't always have it so pleasant. During the 1700's and 1800's trumpeter swans were slaughtered for their meat, skins and feathers and their habitat was thoughtlessly destroyed. By 1884 only one nesting pair was known to exist in the Sibley McLeod County area. The 1930's saw less than 70 known trumpeter swans in the entire United States. These precious few were gallantly struggling for survival in remote areas of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. Thankfully, at that point, the U.S. government established Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Montana. The trumpeter swans in Alaska were saved from extinction by their very remoteness, but had it not been for the valiant efforts of the devoted people at Red Rock, the trumpeter swan would have become extinct in the United States.

In the 1960's Hennepin County obtained 40 swans from Red Rock in an effort to establish a core flock here in Minnesota. Little by little, trumpeter swans accepted their new home and began nesting in Minnesota again in the west metro area. Soon the Minnesota-based Trumpeter Swan Society was formed to help in the restoration program. Minnesota's DNR became proactively involved as soon as it received funds for its Nongame Wildlife Program in the 1980's. DNR Biologist Steve Kittelson collected 40 eggs from Yellowstone Park, took care of them and, after two years, released the birds in northern and southwestern Minnesota to begin their natural lives. From 1986 to 1988 DNR Biologist Carroll Henderson collected 150 eggs in Alaska and similar restoration efforts were carried out in South Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Ontario. Today the count is 2,000 trumpeter swans on Minnesota water, almost half of the total Interior Population of 4,500. (The Interior Population is from South Dakota through Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin,

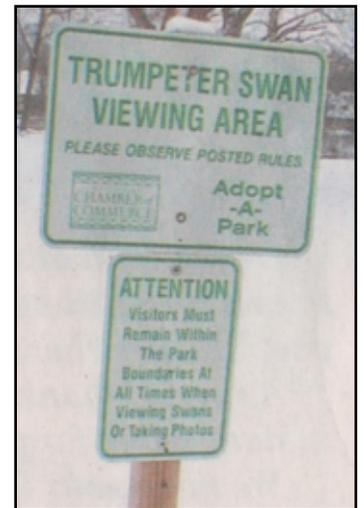


Ohio, Michigan and into Ontario.)

The trumpeter swan is the largest swan in the world and the largest species of waterfowl native to North America. To most they are the epitome of grace, beauty and wild freedom. Our fascination with the trumpeter swan and other swans can be traced throughout history. They have inspired poetry and works of art, music and literature.

But there's more to trumpeter swans than their magnificent appearance. Dignity, loyalty and devotion to their mates and offspring are just some of their admirable qualities. Swans mate for life. They begin their families when they are around three years old. The adult males are called cobs; females are pens. To accommodate the large birds and their babies, their nests may be six to twelve feet or even more in diameter and eighteen inches high. The same nest may very well be used the following year and if the parents find the nest site acceptable, they will usually return year after year. Frequently this is close to where one of the parents, probably the female, was hatched. This promotes a healthy exchange of genes and limits inbreeding. For example, they form their pair bonds at the wintering sites, e.g., Monticello, where they join unrelated birds from other locations.

In late April the pen will lay a clutch of four to seven cream-colored eggs, five inches or more long. The young



swans, cygnets, will hatch after around 33 to 37 days of incubation during which period the nest is constantly guarded by at least one of the parents. The newly hatched babies are fluffy little balls of light gray with pink bills. Their parents protect their cygnets until they fledge (accomplish their first solo flight) which occurs in September when they are around 4 months old. They stay with their parents until the following spring when they leave to start life on their own. If they are reluctant to leave their snug little world, mom and dad chase them away.

The fledglings' life away from their parents begins with their siblings and other groups of youngsters. They remain in this environment until they are around two years old, gaining confidence and experience every day. Then they are ready to seek their own mates and are likely to return to the same habitat in which they grew up.

Trumpeter swans are easy to identify. They're huge—their bodies are 4-5 feet long and their wingspan can measure up to 8 feet. But when they're flying, it's sometimes difficult to determine size. They can be mistaken for the more common, but much smaller, tundra or whistling swan. Their coloring is pretty much identical, i.e., snow white bodies, black legs and feet. But, apart from size, there is one sure way to tell them apart. The trumpeter swan's call is unmistakable. Loud trumpeting—bold and brassy—and the swan isn't at all shy about using it. When several trumpeters get together, they produce a cacophony that is memorable. In comparison, the tundra swan has a softer, higher pitched call, completely different. It's impossible to mistake the two.

Trumpeter swans are snowy white with black bills, legs and feet. If you see trumpeter swans with orange staining around the head and neck, you'll know they have been feeding in iron-rich water. If you get a really close look at a trumpeter swan, you may also notice a red border on the lower jaw that looks like the bird is wearing lipstick.

Some trumpeter swans migrate south but many stay right here along the Mississippi River where the water remains open all winter. Cold doesn't seem to be a problem for them. In the spring they will be found feeding in the little ponds and lakes that are so abundant in Wright County.

It's fun to watch trumpeter swans. Besides their frequent vocalizations, you'll notice a lot of head bobbing. This activity increases when they are getting set to fly. If you watch the "takeoff" run, you'll see their neck form an "S" curve for just a moment. Then, when they are airborne, they stretch out their necks for maximum aerodynamic efficiency. Courtship behavior, in late winter

and early spring, consists of even more head-bobbing and wing-fluttering while looking at each other.

If you're lucky enough to be on hand when young trumpeters are taking flying lessons from their parents, you're in for a treat. They skip over the water, awkwardly flapping their wings until they get the hang of it and away they go! The whole family seems proud of their accomplishment. But it's serious business, too, because the youngsters must be able to fly away with their parents to winter quarters before the lakes freeze.

Today, the trumpeter swans are still on the Minnesota State list of Threatened and Endangered Species, as an endangered species. We have come a long way with a bird that was close to extinction in the United States. But ever-present threats still remain. A major hazard is lead poisoning that occurs when the swans ingest lead shots and sinkers, especially lead shots, as they forage for food from lake bottoms (their long necks enable them to scoop up bottom material in up to four feet of water). More problems are caused when swans get hooked and wrapped in fishhooks and fish lines. Sad and ironic that our treasured trumpeter swans are inadvertently killed by Minnesota sportsmen.

It is illegal to shoot a swan in Minnesota. Unfortunately, illegal shooting is another real danger—despicable and inexcusable because it is so obviously deliberate. It's hard to imagine that a trumpeter swan could be mistaken for a goose. Happily, those responsible face stiff fines, loss of shotguns and hunting license, and up to \$1000 in restitution charges.

Power lines also account for a number of losses. Many power companies are cooperating with DNR to minimize this threat by installing diverters and flappers on wires located in known flight patterns.

And we can help, too. The best way for each of us to help is to make a donation. It's easy—just look for the loon on your state tax form and fill in your contribution. Our donations fund over 80% of Minnesota's Nongame Wildlife Program.

The next time you see trumpeter swans, take that special moment and remember how blessed we are that, with all the hundreds of thousands of locations available, one of God's most beautiful creatures has chosen to live here in Wright County. This is the trumpeter swans' gift to us.

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