

NATURE NOTES

SWAN SONGS — Return of the Trumpeters

Our native **Trumpeter Swans** — *Cygnus buccinator* — are the world's largest species of water bird. They are native to much of North America, but until very recently, few people were able to see them in the wild. By the early 1700s they had all but become extinct.

Trumpeter Swans were an important source of food for First Nations peoples in this part of Ontario. When European settlers began to arrive, swans were still found and hunted for food. But swan numbers began to decline as early as the late 1600s when market hunters killed swans by the thousands for meat, feathers for hats and quills, and the soft leather made from their skins. Loss of wetland habitat and disturbances by humans contributed to the decline. As few as 1000 remained in western North America. By the late 1800s swans were no longer found in Ontario — the last wild Trumpeter was reported in 1886.

We have this grand bird again today largely as a result of work by Harry Lumsden, who served as District Biologist in Tweed in the 1950s. In 1982 he took up the challenge of restoring a breeding population of Trumpeter Swans to eastern Ontario. Using eggs from western birds, Harry and the Trumpeter Swan Society have, in 30 years, brought the population in eastern Ontario from zero to some thousands of wild swans.

And these beautiful birds have come to waterways near you! Three years ago, four Trumpeters spent some time on the Salmon River near Kennebec Lake, and this fall, two groups of around 20 adult and young swans were seen on McGowan Lake.



Trumpeter Swans on the Salmon River: Guenter Nitsche

Life History

At three to four years, adult Trumpeter Swans usually mate for life — some forming lasting bonds as young as two. A pair will defend the territory where they build a nest on beaver lodges and dams and on muskrat houses. They will also nest on land and have used rafts. The large nests are constructed from the surrounding vegetation and are built by both sexes.

Female swans lay 4 to 6 eggs (some as many as 10). Although incubation is done mostly by females, males share care of the cygnets. Trumpeter Swans have an unusual style of incubation — they warm the eggs with their feet!

Cygnets hatch in 32 to 37 days, down-covered and ready to swim and feed, and after 3 to 4 months are ready to fly. They remain with their parents for most of their first year. Large young of the year are darker in colour than their snow-white parents.

Adult Trumpeters skim vegetation from the surface of the water and forage underwater, reaching down with their long necks to dig up roots, stems, tubers and leaves of aquatic vegetation. In deeper water they tip up, tails in the air. They also pull plants out of damp ground. Cygnets start by eating mostly aquatic insects. After about five weeks they will be eating mostly plants.

Challenges remain for local birds:

- Trumpeter Swans have not relearned to migrate, so some still need supplemental food in winter
- Lead poisoning from shotgun pellets and fishing sinkers kills swans that swallow them with their food
- Escaped Mute Swans, introduced from Eurasia, compete for habitat, including nest sites

In winter, two kinds of wild swans can be seen nearby on Lake Ontario:

Native **Trumpeter Swans** with black bills

Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) with orange-red bills with black knob

Native **Tundra Swans**

(*Cygnus columbianus*) also have black bills, but are smaller than Trumpeters and are here during spring and fall migration only.

Swan Stats:

Adult:

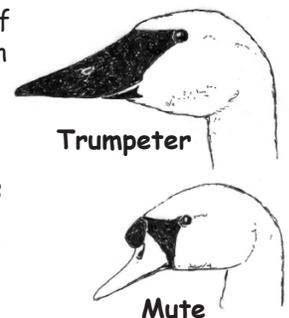
length: 1.4-1.6 m wingspan: 1.8-2.6 m

weight: ~ 8-13 kg

take-off distance required: ~ 100 m

Nest: 3 m diameter

Eggs: ~ 12 x 8 cm, creamy to off- white



by Aileen Merriam