

Swan Observatory

By Carin Christensen, Petersburg Ranger

It is hard to miss the sight of the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*), gliding across the water to rest on Blind Slough, south of Petersburg. The largest of the swans, it stands over four feet tall with an amazing seven foot wingspan. Once on the brink of extinction in the 1920s, full protection has allowed today's numbers to soar over 24,000 in the world, with Alaska home to about 75% of that population.

Blind Slough is one of the northern-most wintering areas for Trumpeter Swans, with peak migration numbers reaching over 150 and over-wintering numbers at about 75. The swans can generally be seen from mid-October until April. The Slough is an intertidal area that remains ice-free and provides an excellent place to forage for food. With strong ties to their nesting and wintering areas, the swans will return to these homes (and often the same nest) year after year.

Now visitors to this area can view the impressive bird from an equally impressive building. In the fall of 2008, the Swan Observatory, located 16 miles south of Petersburg along Mitkof Highway, was rebuilt, replacing the former building constructed in 1985. A local company was contracted by the Forest Service to complete the complex structure, and the majority of the cedar used in the construction was milled in Southeast Alaska. The new design meets accessibility standards and is connected to the highway by an accessible raised boardwalk. The inside of the building feels spacious and offers a bench, new interpretive panels, shutters on the windows, and the best feature of all, two skylights. Even on the darkest day, you could swear that somebody left the lights on.

The interpretive display inside the building highlights the Trumpeter Swan, as well as other bird species found in the area. In surveys completed in 1990, over 100 different species of birds were identified at Blind Slough. Because these birds can be sensitive to human disturbance, it is important that they are viewed from a discreet location. The Swan Observatory provides just that, and more.



Top: Exterior view of swan observatory on Blind Slough south of Petersburg. Bottom: Interpretive panels.

Photos by Carin Christensen.