



## **Return of the Trumpeters**

Spring in northern Minnesota is an amazing time. The days grow warmer, and ice loses its grip on our lakes and ponds. The transition between fully ice covered, and totally open water, is just the right time to take a look around for returning waterfowl.

One of my most favorite species is the trumpeter swan. I saw my first swan up close and personal as it exited a dog carrying crate, one of a handful of swans that were being released by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Nongame program. This particular release was on the Chippewa National Forest. I attended it with my toddler in tow. That toddler is now a young woman 20 years of age.

The swan was part of a very successful reintroduction program. Trumpeter swans were extirpated from Minnesota in the mid 1800's. Swans were used for their meat, skin, and feathers. The hunting of wildlife in this time was a reflection of the frontier mentality, when resources seemed vast, and little thought was given to sustainability. The millinery (hat) trade paid 25 cents per wing for the wings of goose or cranes in 1875. Swans were often bought by fur buyers. Their largest flight feathers were used to make quill pens. By the 1930's, it is estimated that only 69 trumpeter swans remained in the lower 48 States.

The return of the trumpeter swan to Minnesota began in 1966 when Hennepin County Parks began a captive breeding program, using birds brought in from Montana. The program expanded with the involvement of the Minnesota Zoo, and then the MDNR nongame program, funded via the nongame wildlife tax checkoff. Releases of trumpeter swans in Itasca County occurred in the early 1990's.

Since that time, these birds have really taken hold and expanded. In 2004, Minnesota boasted over 2000 trumpeter swans, and similar programs in neighboring states brings the population to more than 4500 birds.

In early spring you can find trumpeter swans in March and April as the water begins to open up. Look for them and you will witness groups of families around the edge of lakes like Winnie and Bowstring, and on open rivers like the Mississippi and Bigfork. Sit quietly at a distance, and you can watch as they tip upside down, reaching their long necks down to forage as deep as they can reach in the water, feeding on the aquatic vegetation. Things get noisy when other swans fly in, and fights erupt between pairs and family groups. Drawing themselves up to as full a height as possible, the swans will hold their wings out, quivering just the tips. A "triumph" display after

altercations involves a lot of head bobbing and loud calling. At a distance, one of the most distinctive characteristics of the trumpeter swan is its voice. It sounds like a French horn.

Adult trumpeter swans are all white, and are easily distinguished from snow geese by their large size, long neck, voice, and lack of black wing tips. Tundra swans, which migrate through Minnesota, have a high-pitched, who-who call, and are smaller than trumpeters. If you see a tundra swan up close, you may be able to spot the yellow marking on the base of the bill, near the eye.

Trumpeter swans can live up to 25 years. They mate for life, and generally begin nesting at about 3 to 4 years old. Five to 7 eggs are usually laid. The nesting pair defends their territory (about 100 acres) vigorously. Years ago, we knew of a cob (male swan) nesting on a Chippewa impoundment that was beating pelicans to death with its wings, apparently defending its territory against other white birds.

Trumpeter swans nest in wetlands, beaver ponds, and impoundments, often on muskrat houses. There is an abundance of such habitat on the Chippewa National Forest, and trumpeter swans are becoming an increasingly common site. In the fall, look for them as they congregate in areas like the chain of Pigeon Lakes to the north of Lake Winnie, and the Bowstring River.

If you're seeking spring sights, the return of the trumpeter swan to our area is a real treat! Why not take a little drive, bring along a picnic, and enjoy the Chippewa National Forest? Habitat for trumpeter swans is just one of many values provided by your forest.

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