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ALBERTA'S TRUMPETER SWAN NEEDS YOUR HELP

By Marian White

The Alberta government recently reaffirmed that the trumpeter swan, which breeds in and migrates through Alberta, remains a Threatened Species here. Accordingly, it has mandated a team to develop a trumpeter recovery plan within twelve months. Meanwhile, the trumpeter's wintering grounds in western Greater Yellowstone remain a bottleneck that could lead to a population crash. Your help is needed in both regards if this swan is to continue its journey back from near extinction.

Background

The trumpeter, the world's largest and rarest swan, is native only to North America. Commercial slaughter by the Hudson's Bay Company drove them to near extinction such that a 1933 summer survey could find only 66 anywhere – only 10 breeding pairs. These were all in Yellowstone National Park and westward on nearby remote mountain lakes, where they remained year-round. Then in 1946, a summer survey at Grande Prairie, Alberta revealed another 100 – a flock we now know migrates south to overwinter with the others in Greater Yellowstone. Together, the sedentary Americans (now 13 per cent) and migratory Canadians (87 per cent) comprised the remnant Rocky Mountain Population (RMP). To save both trumpeter and tundra swans, all swan hunting was outlawed about 86 years ago in Canada and the U.S. But hunting of the look-alike and now numerous tundra has crept back into Utah (1962), Nevada (1969) and Montana (1970).

The Breeding Grounds Today

Hunting bans and habitat protection (and U.S. winter feeding until 1992) are now bearing fruit and Alberta swans have expanded northwest into the Yukon, NWT and northeastern B.C. The latest five-year survey, in September 2000, counted 2,546 Canadian RMP all told – nearly 1,000 (40 per cent) of them in Alberta – of which the core Grande Prairie flock numbers just over 600. This flock is also expanding southeast. A pair in a flock reintroduced into Elk Island National Park successfully bred and fledged young in 1998 – the first in over 100 years there. Also, small pioneer flocks are forming elsewhere in Alberta (see map).

But all is not well. Residential and oil-and-gas development, logging, agribusiness, and recreation continue to destroy, disturb or threaten swan habitat. As for migration habitat around Calgary, housing is encroaching on Cochrane Lake, illegal pheasant hunting disturbs trumpeters on Frank Lake, and the City's plan to dredge Glenmore Reservoir would destroy habitat there.

Fortunately, the Alberta government reaffirmed in August 2001 that the trumpeter is a Threatened Species under our Wildlife Act, so it is legally required to put in place a trumpeter recovery plan. It will hold the first of four Recovery Team meetings in Grande Prairie in late April and intends to produce the plan within 12 months. So. Now is the time to have your say.

The Wintering Grounds Situation

Meanwhile, the tiny, ice-free haven in Greater Yellowstone that saved the swans from extinction is totally inadequate for today's RMP numbers; hence trumpeters have spread to nearby lakes and streams. But these freeze in severe winters, or dry up, as in the current long drought, forcing overcrowding on remaining open water and potential death from disease or starvation. Thus the RMP is predicted to crash again.

To avert disaster, the RMP must rediscover and re-establish safe migration routes to more extensive and milder winter habitat further south, especially to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah. But they cannot do so without encountering tundra hunters – especially at Bear River itself. Regrettably, in





October 2000, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service introduced a three-year “experimental” tundra hunt (a fraud in that no sound science was conducted) that allowed a limited take of southward-bound trumpeters without penalty.¹ Public pressure reduced the allowable take, the hunt season, and the area hunted. The Service has no credible data from the “experiment” but estimates 11 trumpeters were killed in each of five previous seasons. These are *precisely* the birds that could have restarted the southerly migration.

Well, the three-year “experimental” hunt ended in January, and we don’t want a new “experiment” to start this October. So, your help is needed.

Trumpeters – Harbingers of Spring. Enjoy!

Finally, with joy in my heart, I learned on March 29 that the first trumpeters had arrived in southern Alberta on migration north to their breeding grounds. In early April, we shall see them again just west of Calgary, and on Glenmore Reservoir and Frank Lake. Let’s keep them coming.

Take Action

Your help is needed if this swan is to continue its journey back from near extinction.

Trumpeters in Alberta: As individuals and as an organization, make your concerns known by contacting the Recovery Team leader (shown below). For more information, contact Marian White.

Trumpeter migration habitat around Calgary: Find out more from the Weaselhead-Glenmore Park Protection Society. Then make your views known to your city councillor, Mayor Bronconnier, and the Recovery Team.

Wintering grounds: Sign up now so the Trumpeter Swan Society can call upon you to write letters when the time comes (shortly). Do this by letting the Marian White have your name, address, postal code, phone/fax and email address.

Contacts and Resources

Marian White
The Trumpeter Swan Society
Tel/fax Calgary 403-246-2994
sherwood@nucleus.com

Mark Heckbert, Team Leader
Trumpeter Swan Alberta Recovery Plan
Alberta Fish & Wildlife
High Prairie, AB
Tel RITE 310-0000 + 780-523-6517
Mark.Heckbert@gov.ab.ca

Brent Johner
Weaselhead Glenmore Park Preservation Soc.
403-251-7486
<http://weaselhead.org>

Follow Yukon RMP trumpeters through Alberta on migration at www.uen.org/swan.
Visit the Trumpeter Swan Society at www.taiga.net/swans/index.html.

¹ See White’s article in *Wild Lands Advocate*, June 2000.

² Later, a remnant Pacific Population was found in Alaska, and managers started an Interior Population from scratch to the east. In February 2003, Pacific Coast, RMP and Interior Trumpeters combined totalled around 25,000.

(Marian White is a member of The Trumpeter Swan Society and presented a paper on Alberta trumpeter habitat to the society’s 19th Biennial Conference, Richmond, BC, in February 2003. She will be involved with the Recovery Team.)



