



WAYNE LYNCH

Alberta's Trumpeter Swan

(*Cygnus buccinator*)

threatened

status

Alberta: Threatened; listed since 1987 (Threatened status reaffirmed in 2001)

Saskatchewan: May Be At Risk

Manitoba: Extirpated

British Columbia: Sensitive

Northwest Territories: Sensitive

Canada (COSEWIC): Downlisted from Vulnerable to Not at Risk in 1996

USA: Apparently Secure (N4); removed from Endangered species list

Description

The trumpeter swan is a migratory waterfowl species seen across the aspen parkland and boreal forest of Alberta during spring, summer and fall. It is a large, white bird with an unusually long and graceful neck. It often has a rusty-orange stain on its head and neck as a result of feeding in lakes that are high in iron.

The trumpeter swan is easily confused with the similar-looking, though smaller, tundra swan. However, trumpeter swans often have a red line along the upper edge of their lower jaw, whereas tundra swans do not. Unlike the trumpeter swan, most tundra swans have a yellow patch in front of their eye, and their eyes do not appear to blend into the black base of their bill, but appear separate from it.

Habitat

The trumpeter swan establishes nest sites on shallow lakes and marshes, and excludes other swans from the water body. It requires an abundance of aquatic plants, snails and insects for its food. The trumpeter swan is very sensitive to repeated disturbances, including loud traffic (planes, gravel trucks, motorbikes), boats, floatplanes, pedestrians, and human intrusion on a breeding lake. Under such conditions, it will either not nest or will abandon nests and young. Survival of eggs and cygnets (juvenile swans) decreases as human activity increases in the breeding area. Breeding adults, eggs and cygnets are most sensitive from mid-April to late June.

Distribution and Population

Historically, the trumpeter swan bred throughout our province. However, by the early 1900s, it was near extinction. Vast numbers of this swan had been shot for down, feathers and meat, and much of its habitat had been lost to human settlement. By the 1930s, a small population in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming was the only known breeding population, although remnant flocks of the trumpeter swan were still found in Alaska, northwestern Alberta and Montana.

Since 1944, the trumpeter swan has gradually increased in Alberta. In 2000, surveys accounted for 995 swans in Alberta, 608 of which were found in the Grande Prairie area. Other small flocks have been found scattered across the province.

Threats

The greatest limiting factor that threatens the trumpeter swan is a critical shortage of wintering habitat. During winter, the majority of trumpeter swans from Alberta concentrate on open waters in the greater Yellowstone area in the "Tristate" region of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. They share this very small area with trumpeter swans from the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and British Columbia, as well as locally breeding swans. Competition for the limited food supply is high, and as a result some birds either die or are in relatively poor condition by spring. Overcrowding of swans in one small area also increases the potential for major



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losses resulting from disease, parasites, severe weather conditions, and habitat alteration. Further sources of swan mortality may include predation, lead poisoning, accidental shooting and electrocution from collisions with power lines.

Management

In the 1930s, an international program to save the trumpeter swan from extinction began with the protection of the bird and its remaining habitat. In North America, the trumpeter swan has responded well to restoration programs and conservation efforts, and has been removed from the United States' list of endangered species. An international swan management plan has recently been outlined and goals for breeding populations have been set.

Our trumpeter swan population in Alberta is increasing and this bird appears to be returning to some of its historic range. Continued success depends upon the reduction of breeding disturbances, and the ability of breeding and wintering birds to expand their range.

The establishment of Alberta's trumpeter swan in new wintering areas would reduce the vulnerability of the population on the tristate wintering ground. An attempt to re-establish a breeding population at Elk Island National Park is ongoing. Elk Island is now home to three breeding pairs, and a few of these birds have been observed in new wintering areas in Oregon and California.

A Provincial Recovery Plan will soon be prepared, setting goals, objectives, strategies and actions needed to guide management of trumpeter swans over the next five years. This planning exercise will be integrated with both national and international recovery and conservation initiatives.

Biologists from the United States and Canada are currently studying population dynamics,

migration, wintering area use, and survival rates of the trumpeter swan. Concerned naturalists and residents in the Grande Prairie region have also supported efforts to protect trumpeter swan habitat and reduce human disturbance.

What You Can Do To Help

As a member of the public, a land manager or an industrial developer:

- Report any sightings of the trumpeter swan to the nearest office of the Fish and Wildlife Division, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. Many trumpeter swans have been marked with coloured collars and some, with yellow-orange dye on areas of their bodies.
- Restrict your access to trumpeter swan breeding lakes. Disturbances such as recreational activity on lakes (i.e., boating) are disruptive to breeding activity. Although the birds, eggs and cygnets are sensitive throughout the breeding season, they are most sensitive from mid-April to late June.
- Contact wildlife management staff at the nearest Fish and Wildlife Division office for ways that you can minimize impacts on the trumpeter swan and its wetland habitat, and to assist in monitoring the status of the trumpeter swan.

