

## SAVING THE TRUMPETER SWAN

By FREDA DAVIES

Around the turn of the twentieth century, North American conservationists embarked on an intensive campaign to prevent the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) from following the Passenger Pigeon into extinction.

Hopes are high now that success will be achieved. Exact progress is difficult to estimate owing to lack of definite figures as to the swan population at the start of the project. It is believed, however, that a considerable increase has taken place since 1917 when the birds were first protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty.

In Canada, present estimates show a population of at least 650 trumpeters and probably as many as 900. They are scattered over a wide area of sparsely populated country and the only nesting area so far discovered is in central Alberta. Most of the birds winter on the lakes and rivers of interior and coastal British Columbia.

In the United States, the 1950 census showed a population of 376 and it is believed the 1951 nesting success is comparable to last year's. Most of these birds are located at the Red Rock Lakes Refuge in Montana and in the Yellowstone Park sanctuary in Wyoming.

This estimate of 376 indicates a drop of 75 birds, as the 1949 census showed 451. In Alaska, however, an increasing number of trumpeters has been noted, as many as 350 having been seen in one season recently in the south-eastern section. No definite figure is available for birds in Alaska, owing to the difficulty of checking in the remote areas.

Service biologists are of the opinion that the reason for the drop in population in the United States is due to a dispersal of some of the birds from known breeding grounds to ancient haunts, perhaps farther north.

This is borne out by the increased numbers of birds seen in Canada and Alaska; also by the fact that scattered pairs have been seen in other parts of the United States.

Breeding swans maintain territorial rights in the vicinity of their nests. Space and food for non-breeders, therefore, is limited and as the birds do not breed until five or six years old, a fairly large proportion of non-nesters must disperse to other suitable habitat.

Only limited success has been achieved in establishing surplus

birds in other wildlife refuges in the United States but it would seem the birds themselves are locating other suitable breeding grounds.

Every possible measure is being taken to protect the swans and an aroused interest in the preservation of our wildlife is helping to ensure the success of the project. Newspaper and magazine publicity, lectures, displays of mounted birds and animals, and film and slide exhibitions play a part in impressing on the public the inestimable value of the fauna of the world.

There are still, however, a regrettably large number of persons whose one idea when they hear of an unusual bird or animal, is to go out and kill it. Therefore, the location of unguarded Trumpeter Swans is kept secret, while at the Refuges in both Canada and the United States year-round guardians are maintained by the Wildlife Services of the two countries; seasonal guardians care for the birds in the main wintering areas.

One such wintering area in Canada is known as Lonesome Lake. When feeding becomes necessary, one-half pound of barley per day is allowed for each bird and the grain is scattered in the patches of open water which usually exist where the current is rapid or springs exist.

Should very cold weather cause a complete freeze-over, holes must be chopped in the ice to provide open water for the feeding swans.

Trumpeter Swans at one time ranged all over the west and midwestern continent. As civilization advanced, the birds suffered increasing destruction.

They had been able to cope with the natural hazards—occasional starvation, parasitism, and some loss by predators—but when man, the greatest predator of all, appeared, the odds were too great.

Indiscriminate shooting for “sport” was augmented by destruction for profit. In the early days, a very large trade existed in swans’ breast skins. This trade, of course, has long been banned.

Man constitutes an indirect menace also to the birds. Spent shot from firearms falls to the bottom of ponds and lakes and is swallowed by the birds along with the gravel and small pebbles they require for digestion. Death results from lead poisoning when a sufficient number of shot have accumulated in the gizzard.

Wildlife Management Officers do what they can to offset this loss: catching sick birds, where possible, pumping their

“stomachs”, and administering antidotes. This factor does, nevertheless, constitute a serious threat to the lives of our larger waterfowl.

There are two species of swans in North America. The trumpeter is the larger and is rivalled in size only by the Whooping Crane and the Wild Turkey. Average length of the male is about five and one-half feet from tip to tip and average weight about twenty-eight pounds though some specimens have been recorded as touching thirty-eight pounds.

Its most outstanding characteristic, however, is its sonorous vocal achievements. The resonant “trumpeting” floating across the countryside is a thrilling sound and it would be a tragedy if these splendid birds were to disappear from the North American scene.

The other species of swan, the Whistling (*Cygnus columbianus*) is smaller than the Trumpeter and differs in the formation of the windpipe. In both species, this forms a large flat loop in the sternum but in the trumpeter it rises in a perpendicular hump before it leaves the breastbone. The difference in structure accounts for the variance in the calls of the two birds, that of the trumpeter being much deeper.

Both birds are white with black feet and bills though there are occasionally rusty stains about the head, while most Whistling Swans have a small yellow or orange spot on the bare skin in front of the eye.

The latter is an extremely wary bird and breeds only in the far north. It has not, therefore, suffered so drastically from the predations of man. It, too, is protected under the Migratory Birds Convention Act and cannot be taken legally anywhere in Canada or the United States.

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