

THE EARLIEST HISTORICAL RECORDS OF TRUMPETER SWANS - EXTRALIMITAL TO TODAY'S DISTRIBUTION

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Editors' Note: This paper was presented as a poster at the 20th Society Conference.

The earliest historical mention of swans in North America found by Banko (1960) extends back to 1632, when Thomas Morton wrote about their occurrence in New England. The next record mentioned by Banko is from John Lawson, who in 1709 documented their occurrence in North Carolina and was the first to differentiate between Trumpeter and Tundra swans; Lawson referred to them by name as "trumpeters" and alluded to their nesting on lakes. Banko then comments that it was another century before Trumpeter Swans specifically appeared in the literature again, this time in the journals of Lewis and Clark; and that swans, in general, did not appear in the literature until 1795 when Samuel Hearne published his Hudson Bay/Arctic diaries from the period 1769-72. However, Banko contradicts himself after mentioning Belkamp's 1784 description of trumpeters in New Hampshire. Banko (1960) and Mitchell (1994) document fossil records from Florida; former breeding as far south as the Carolinas, Tennessee and Mississippi; and former wintering along the Gulf Coast to central Florida, along the Atlantic coast northward, and two winter records from Mexico as far south as Tamaulipas.

I have found an earlier record of swans in the literature, and it is a record that is extralimital from today's known historic distribution of swans. In 1587, John White recorded swans in the East Caicos Islands, southeast of southern Florida that, at that time of year, could only have been Trumpeter Swans. At the time he was leading an expedition to Virginia to establish a colony of which he would be the governor. White was an accomplished artist, of both Native Americans and wildlife in detail, and he had been part of the 1585 expedition to Roanoke in which he and Thomas Harriot accomplished an immense natural history survey of the region's flora, fauna, people, geography and geology. Some of his paintings even depict swans flying in the background. Previously, he had also been on one of Frobisher's expeditions to Baffin Island in 1577. Therefore, there is no reason to question his identification in the excerpt from his journal that follows:

"The sixt of Julie wee came to the Islande Caycos... others spent the latter part of that day in other parts of the Island ... some fowling, some hunting Swannes, whereof we caught many. The next daye early in the morning we waied anker, leaving Caycos, with good hope, the first lande that wee sawe next, should be Virginia. About the 16. of July we fell with the maine of Virginia ..." (David Beers in Quinn and Quinn, 1985).

There is no other species of swan that this could be other than the Trumpeter Swan, presuming that Tundra Swans vacated the Atlantic seaboard then as they do now in spring and summer. Tundra Swans have been recorded as accidental in Bermuda, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (Limpert and Eamst 1994). It is interesting that White uses the phrase "...whereof we caught many," instead of "shot" many. Does that imply flightlessness, perhaps as cygnets or molters? Regardless, this is a significant extension of the known historical range of Trumpeter Swans whether they were breeders or nonbreeders. If these were molting birds, than that would further suggest Trumpeter Swans instead of tundras. Trumpeters typically molt in late June and July (Mitchell 1994), e.g., 13 July 1823 in Minnesota (Banko 1960) whereas tundras typically molt late July through mid-August (Limpert and Earnst, 1994; pers. observation).

OTHER EARLY SWAN RECORDS

In the interest of historical accuracy, it should be noted that there are other early records of swans that Banko (1960) overlooked. Thomas Harriot (1588) wrote "...and in winter great store of Swannes and Geese ..." occurred at Roanoke, North Carolina, in 1585-86. Although Hamot's account predates White's account, Harriot's swans cannot be prescribed as trumpeters or tundras because of the time of year. And, although White's paintings from the 1585-86 expedition depict swans, there is uncertainty to what time of year they were painted. Captain John Smith (1630) mentioned encountering swans in coastal Massachusetts during the summer and/or fall of 1614. Alexander Henry, one of the few English traders to survive the Ojibwa massacre of the British at Fort Mackinac on June 4, 1763, wrote, "I

had, in the room in which I was, a fowling piece loaded with swan shot [at the onset of the attack]" (in Warren 1984, page 205). Lastly, Jonathan Carver included swans among "a vast resort of all sorts of water fowl" along the Minnesota River, Minnesota, in the fall and spring of 1766-67 (Parker 1976).

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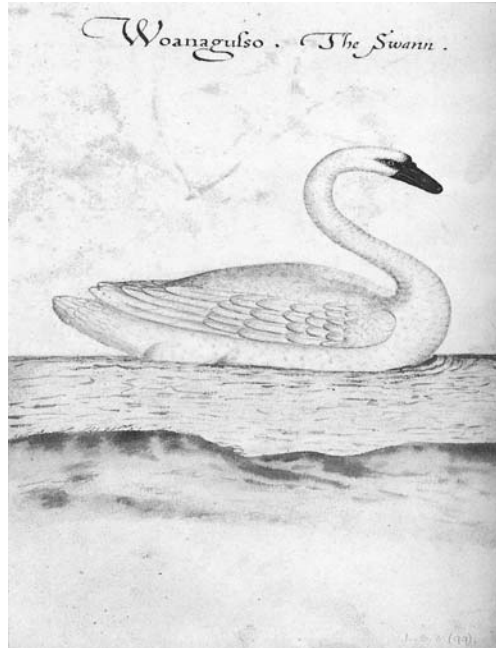


Figure 1. Swan painting by John White, 1585. From: Hulton, P. 1984. *America 1585, The Complete Drawings of John White*. University of North Carolina Press. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

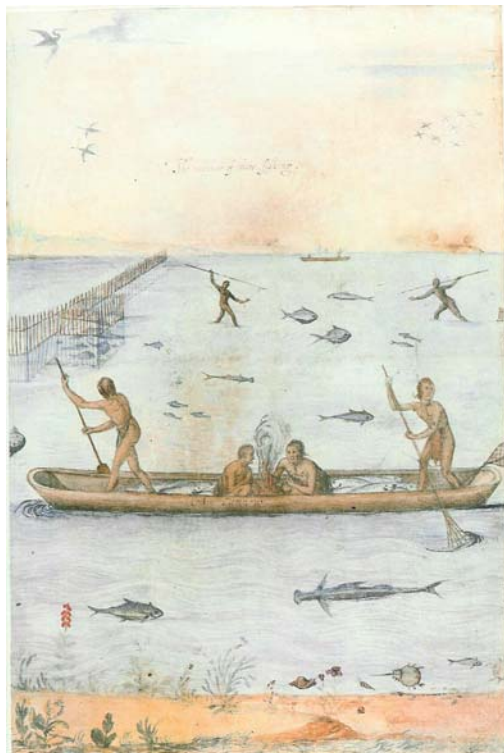


Figure 2. Indians fishing, with swans flying in background, John White, 1585. From: Hulton, P. 1984. *America 1585, The Complete Drawings of John White*. University of North Carolina Press. © The Trustees of the British Museum.