

## TRUMPETER SWANS ONCE WINTERED ON THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI RIVER. WHY NOT NOW?

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Great numbers of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) historically wintered on the Lower Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and their tributaries (Audubon 1838, Banko 1960, Bent 1925, Coale 1915, Corning 1929, McDermott 1942). Audubon wrote of the large numbers of Trumpeters that drifted down the Ohio and Arkansas Rivers to the Mississippi in winter.

McIlhenny (1897) wrote that Trumpeters were winter residents on the Louisiana coast and were more common than Whistling (Tundra) Swans (*Cygnus columbianus*). Beyer *et al.* (1907) wrote that, in the past, Trumpeters were more common than Whistling Swans in Louisiana and especially around the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Nehrling (1882) wrote, "Every winter there are great numbers [of Trumpeters] on Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico." Dresser (1865) said that swans were common at Brownsville, Texas, where Armstrong collected Harvard's female Trumpeter, specimen #49836, across the Rio Grande at Matamoros, Tamaulipas, in 1909 (Phillips 1911, Coale 1915). Eldridge reported in Forbush (1912) that flocks of 75 to 1000 Trumpeters were seen over Lampasas, Texas, in the 1890s.

It is evident that Trumpeters once wintered in great numbers in Texas and Louisiana. Both states have ignored these historical facts. It is logical that either state could restore wintering Trumpeters by establishing a decoy-breeding flock, as we have recommended for Texas (Burgess 1992). If some members of Texas Parks and Wildlife and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries wish to ignore the benefits of Trumpeter Swans and do not want them because Trumpeters are not huntable and Trumpeters might interfere with their traditional waterfowl hunting, they should not complain if states farther up in the migration corridor "shortstop" the migration with decoy-breeding flocks and supplementary feeding programs.

Probably the most concentrated area of wintering Trumpeters was the Mississippi River between the Ohio and Arkansas Rivers where local breeding

swans decoyed migrating Trumpeters. S. P. Hildreth reported swans common on the Mississippi between New Madrid and Memphis on 20-22 May 1805 (Rogers and Hammer 1980). On 27 May 1808, Fortesque Cuming (Thwaites 1906) recorded a very large flock of swans on the low, sandy point of Devil's Elbow, a notorious hazard about 15 miles above Memphis, Tennessee. These had to be local Trumpeters as the migrants would have departed by March. The swans on Devil's Elbow were probably a molting group of subadults and other nonbreeding Trumpeters.

Rogers and Hammer (1980) postulated a Trumpeter Swan breeding colony in northeast Arkansas and the Yazoo River Basin in northwest Mississippi. But I believe that the range of their "Middle Mississippi Trumpeter Breeding Population" extended north to the junction of the Ohio River and took in the wetland basins and sunken lands on both sides of the Mississippi River.

In McKinley (1962), we find that Titian Ramsey Peale wrote in his Long Expedition Diary for 4 June 1819, on the Mississippi River below Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, "Saw first swan we have seen on this river ... It was walking on a sandbar and could not fly, probably casting its feathers." This was probably an early molter from the Middle Mississippi Trumpeter Swan breeding population.

The reports of Rhoads (1895) and Ganier (1929) indicated that swans were common at Reelfoot Lake in northwest Tennessee as late as 1926. Rhoads indicated that Trumpeters were more common than Whistling Swans. Ganier reported train car loads of swans killed and shipped from Reelfoot Lake until their breeding grounds were settled. I consider the Reelfoot Lake Flock a part of that Middle Mississippi Trumpeter Swan breeding population.

So what is the object of this discussion? It appears that a Trumpeter Swan breeding population once existed on the middle Mississippi River and that these local Trumpeters decoyed and held migrant Trumpeters in that area. Therefore, following Larry Gillette's (1995) proposal, we encourage the middle

Mississippi states of Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, and southern Illinois to consider establishing decoy Trumpeter Swan breeding flocks in good habitats near the Mississippi River to attract wintering Trumpeters from the north and to help restore the Middle Mississippi Trumpeter Swan breeding and wintering populations.

By restoring Trumpeter Swans, states and agencies could improve their image, improve the quality of life, promote quality wetlands, promote recreation, and increase their ecotourism. These states have the locations and the authority, while The Trumpeter Swan Society has the knowledge and the technique necessary to restore Trumpeter Swans. We would like to cooperate.

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