

# **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE RESTORATION OF THE TRUMPETER SWANS WITHIN THE INTERIOR POPULATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Personal histories of three individuals from the public domain who have participated in the restoration program of the Trumpeter Swan are presented.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

All three presenters agree that the only way we might shape the diverse approaches to public participation in the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) restoration is to turn the statement implied in our title into a question. Consequently, we will each respond with personal histories of our roles by relating brief scenarios as bit-players in this great ecological drama.

We do this with the hope that we will in some ways put a face on public participation. For our purposes here, we will define “public” in the broadest sense of the word, that is, from the original Latin meaning of “populace.” To define “non-public,” we take the term in its narrowest sense to mean anyone connected with a public or private agency who is actively and professionally involved in the Trumpeter’s restoration. Thus, “public” may mean someone in the natural sciences, such as the medical doctor with whom I went to southern Oklahoma to search for swans, or, it may mean a fifth-grade girl who is reading E. B. White’s *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970). “Public” may also include a hunter with a gun looking up at white birds flying overhead and scrolling through his hunting regulations to find out if they are Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*). One fact none of us who knows of the migration of Trumpeter Swans must not forget is that many, no doubt most, of the public is not aware of the existence of swans in the wild.

The answer to the question of how any individual may be informed and may move from the vast arena of the general public to be nudged from a neutral stance into the realm of knowledge and participation has the potential for numerous responses, possibly as many as the individuals who live on the Trumpeter Swan’s migratory corridor. With our three unique responses, however, there is a common thread. It is

that we had learned something of the Trumpeter through information put out by The Trumpeter Swan Society, we had knowingly seen Trumpeters in parks and zoos, and we witnessed the swans in the wild.

The fact that the three of us, as individuals representing the public, are together has been brought about through a series of accidental sightings of swans and encounters with one another. All these occurrences are apparently as random as a yearling swan’s swerving flight into new territory. We three, however, have a common bond. It is an inherent love of animals, “biophilia” E. O. Wilson (1984) calls it, and each of us has a particular fondness for Trumpeter Swans. We admire them not just for their magnificence but for their importance to our land’s natural heritage, one which was almost lost by the 1930s.

## **ALICE PRICE**

My personal history, or story, begins on Valentine’s Day of 1991. It was then, alerted by Al Stacey, an Oklahoma nongame wildlife manager, that there were Trumpeter Swans in the area, that Russell Studebaker and I first witnessed free-flying Trumpeter Swans. Our first sighting was of that great and heroic swan from Hennepin Parks, NC59, his mate, and one cygnet. This experience gave me a focus for a book which I had been researching on the swan species of the world.

There was one more sighting of the Trumpeter pair on a private lake near Tulsa. They disappeared just after Christmas of 1991. The next fall, we searched for the Minnesota swans. No luck. In January, on the coldest day of the Oklahoma year in 1993, we heard from an Audubon Society friend that the word was out that there were swans about seventy-five miles north and west of Tulsa near Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

They were on a ranch lake in Osage County. The Osage is a vast sprawling landscape of ranches and oil wells. It is the historical home of the Osage Tribe who have Trumpeter Swans figuring in their traditions and legends as an emblem of both warlike strength and peaceful beauty. The Osage is also where the last remnants of tallgrass prairie edge the eastern vegetation to begin the Great Plains.

We found NC59 again with his mate, NC55, and four cygnets. This made our third sighting, and, as far as we are aware, the winter half of a third successful migration. Since then they have completed three more successful round trips and are now on the winter leg of a seventh migration. While we were leaning over the barbed wire fence watching the swans from a distance, down the road came Janine Kyler. The swans were on her and her family's land. I recognized her at once as someone who understands the language of swans.

Since first witnessing the swans in the wild and reporting their presence to TTSS, I became actively interested in the Society's mission to restore a sustainable population of Trumpeter Swans to the conterminous United States. Like the swans who migrate north and south, I have been fortunate to learn more about them by living in Oklahoma in the winter and the Great Lakes region of Michigan in summer. I have had the singular opportunity to meet people such as Roswell Van Deusen, retired director of Kellogg Bird Sanctuary, and Joe Johnson, present director, both of whom have been active in the Trumpeter's restoration to Michigan.

Consequently, my individual role has been nearly, but not totally, that of a "closet naturalist", a pejorative term John James Audubon used for book-bound people like me. I have used any abilities I may have to write about the Trumpeters, to depict them in drawings and photographs, and to speak of them on local television and in libraries and halls whenever I have the opportunity. Furthermore, through my book, *Swans of the world in nature history, myth, and art* (Price 1994), I have received many letters from readers with an incipient interest in swans. I respond eagerly with the hope that they, too, will fall over the edge into the kingdom of the swan.

To sum up any role which I have played in Trumpeter Swan restoration as one of the public, I might say that my part has been that of spreading information. You will hear from Janine Kyler and Russell Studebaker that they, too, have helped to disseminate

information, but they have also contributed some elements unique to their own lives and situations.

## JANINE KYLER

As a private Oklahoma landowner living on the winter end of the Trumpeter's migratory route, I think the most important part I can play is to help make their winter stay a successful and safe one.

To prepare for the swans' arrival every fall, I make an effort to clear our 28-acre lake of any hazardous debris which might be carelessly left from summer activities. I particularly search for lead sinkers, trot lines, and fishing line. I do so with the hope that the Trumpeters will be safe while they are here.

I try to get information out to any people living in the area. I talk to teachers and students in the schools nearby. I make numerous phone calls to game wardens to let them know when the swans are coming and when they are here. I also talk to the pumpers, the men who check on the oil wells all over this region of Oklahoma. The pumpers are a great help because they travel into areas where swans might go but where very few other people might be.

In our area, food sources for the swans may be short, particularly if there has been a summer drought. I supplement their natural diet with corn. I am the only one who ever goes beyond the fence near the lake's edge. I always try to wear the same sweater. If anyone from the outside comes to visit, I ask them to remain on the house side of the lake.

The lake is large enough that it generally will not freeze over entirely. There are times when ice must be broken to give the swans open water. One winter, I was helped in my ice-breaking chores by a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The eagle swooped down, broke his descent with his wings, and then hit the ice with his talons, as if he was trying to break it. The swans have never seemed to have any problem with the eagle.

The swans generally leave the ranch on their return migration by early March. During the month of February, I begin to supplement their diet with breeder pellets.

We have seen swans in our area before, but, in 1993, the swans from Minnesota chose to stay on our family's lake. They wintered over. I took pictures of the first family to arrive, NC59, his mate, and their cygnets. Through these photos, I have an ongoing record of their behavior. I report the date of their

arrival and the number in the group to the Society. I let Minnesota know when they leave. I also report any unusual happenings or injuries I might see. When NC59 and his family were joined by T10, a swan from Wisconsin, and his family, I reported that to the Society immediately. This fall, 15 swans arrived, NC59's family, T10's family, and a previous female cygnet of NC59's, now grown, with what might be her mate.

This winter, we had what so far has been our worst tragedy. The game warden called to notify me that he had seen two dead swans on a ranch near our land. He could not go on private land, but I could. I collected the bodies from the ice. Their green collars were missing, but I had already noticed that two subadults were missing from the flock. One of NC59's and one of T10's. I took the two bodies to a veterinarian in Bartlesville who x-rayed them. They had been shot. I kept the two bodies frozen until the game warden arrived and I could bury them officially. I contacted local newspapers that these protected birds had been killed. I notified the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service representative of their shooting. I put out posters all over the area announcing that The Trumpeter Swan Society was offering a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killers. The reward is \$500, but state and federal officials right at this moment are trying to get funds to add to that reward.

The swans are still there. As their migration time draws near, you can be sure their diet will be supplemented. There never has been an animal in my life as special as those birds are.

## **RUSSELL STUDEBAKER**

My participation in Trumpeter Swan restoration as a private citizen began through my interest in waterfowl and aviculture. In the mid-1980s, the City of Tulsa passed a bond issue for the repair and improvement of several park sites, one of which was \$500,000 for Swan Lake Park. This 2½-acre lake is located in a midtown, historical residential neighborhood. It has been a popular attraction with the public with its swans and ducks for almost three generations.

The improvements to the park and lake included draining and dredging, and the lake would be drained for over a year. Swan Lake Park was under my management and supervision, was located within about four blocks of my park office, and was also in the neighborhood where I lived.

Since the mid-1960s, I had taken a personal interest in Swan Lake Park and had fed and cared for the waterfowl at the end of the work day after my regular park duties. The waterfowl at the lake consisted of Mute Swans (*C. olor*) and a few other birds, Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), a few pair of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*), Mandarin Ducks (*Aix galericulata*), and some domestic ducks. Also in the late 1960s, I became a member of The International Wild Waterfowl Association and attended several of their annual conferences and European tours. All of this led me to hear some notable waterfowl authorities and aviculturists of the day, such as Dr. Jean Delacour, Dr. S. Dillion Ripley, Dr. Bill Conway, John Griswold, and Glenn Smart.

As I was very involved with the master plan for Swan Lake Park, the idea came to me that this would be an excellent time to create a new collection of waterfowl. Other than the Mute Swans, I had purchased the other desirable waterfowl that was on the lake. So I formed an organization in 1986 which became incorporated as The Swan Lake Waterfowl Society and whose basic objectives were to propagate and maintain the collection of birds, develop an ecological habitat, provide passive recreation and education for the public, and to preserve the area.

One of the major items to determine was what kinds of waterfowl to put in the newly renovated Swan Lake. I chose to use native North American waterfowl for the new collection which would be purchased from licensed breeders of captive stock. The pair of Mute Swans would be sold, and all the domestic ducks would be eliminated. A flyer was designed with the 32 species named, along with their cost, and was circulated in the neighborhood and promoted within the city in order to find sponsors of the birds. In less than two years, the almost \$7,000, including the \$2,000 for the pair of young Trumpeters, was given by individuals, families and organizations for the 100 birds. This was one place that the public could see and hear Trumpeters, since at that time about the only other Trumpeters in the state were in zoos.

Alice Lindsey Price was one of the original people on the Swan Lake Waterfowl board that I had selected, and she was the one who told me about The Trumpeter Swan Society. Soon after, our organization became a TTSS member. Another one of our original waterfowl society board members was Allen Stacey, who was a wildlife biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

In the winter of 1991, Allen Stacey called Alice and me to go with him to see three Trumpeters that were on Mannford Lake, a short distance west of Tulsa. This was our first sighting of Hennepin Park's famous NC59, and, at that time, he was with another mature adult swan and a gray cygnet.

Then, in January of 1993, we were alerted by field trip members of the Tulsa Audubon Society about a flock of Trumpeters, a pair and their four young, that were on a small pond in the Osage country west of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. When we went to see them, they were Hennepin Park's NC59, its mate, and their cygnets. This pair had begun to migrate and winter on a 10,000-acre ranch on a lake behind Janine Kyler's house. We became friends with Janine and shared with her what information we knew about these Trumpeters and about TTSS.

Afterwards, we frequently called Janine about what the swans were doing, and I led and conducted tour groups of members of the Swan Lake Waterfowl Society and other interested parties up to see them on her lake. Most of the trips were successful, but there were times when they either did not show up or had flown out to other ponds or lakes on the ranch.

Then another milestone event took place. Although the captive Trumpeters had nested for several years at Swan Lake, they had not successfully hatched their eggs. In 1994, two Trumpeter eggs from the Tulsa Zoo were placed under the pen at Swan Lake when her own eggs proved infertile. She hatched the eggs, and one cygnet was raised. 1995 was an even better year as the Swan Lake pair hatched three of their own cygnets. It created a great deal of interest with the public and the Tulsa media, and it was a traffic-stopper for the public who were able to watch the cygnets growing up on the lake.

The three cygnets grew up, and, after they began to fly the length of the lake, they were taken to the Tulsa Zoo and kept in a covered holding pen. After a couple of weeks, the two female cygnets were picked up and taken by car to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. They were to be released as 2-year-olds on Heron Marsh, Minnesota.

Due to space limitations at the zoo, the male was transferred to a private holding facility in October. Larry Gillette proposed that we try releasing him on the wintering grounds with the migrant Trumpeters. This male cygnet was banded 5A3, and, finally, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife approved his release, which was in early January 1995. We

nicknamed him Sasquatch, for the mythical bigfoot creature.

The release was a bit shaky for both us and Sasquatch, but, after a few days, he integrated into the flock, although he was definitely at the lower end of the pecking order of both migrating families, NC59 and Wisconsin's T10 (formally 79KU). In late February of 1996, the Trumpeters started their migration back north, a little earlier than in previous years, and 5A3, Sasquatch, left with the flock.

We all were very curious where he had arrived in the north, but no one had seen him. Then, we got a call from Donna Compton many weeks later. This cygnet had dropped out of the flock on his journey north stopping at Neosho Falls, Kansas. The landowners had some Canada Geese on their lake. This is a straight distance of about 90 to 100 miles, as the crow flies, from his release in Oklahoma. In all probability, he did not have sufficient time to build up his full flying strength due to the fact that he had been penned for so long before his release.

Then, around Easter of 1996, Sasquatch returned on his own back to Janine's lake in Oklahoma. I strongly suspect that the Canada Geese where he stopped in Kansas were aggressive and harassed him out of their territory. He returned to his only known "safe home" at Janine Kyler's, where he stayed all summer. This fall, 14 Trumpeters arrived at her lake, and 5A3 was there to greet them.

Those of us who have been keeping up with the swans are excited about this spring. I am curious about 5A3's journey north. Will he follow the NC59 family to Minnesota, or will he choose to go with Wisconsin's T10 family? And what will be his tradition in a few years after he has paired with a mate? Whose migration route will be taken, his or hers? It is these questions and yearly and cyclical activities that have added a new dimension and continued interest in these magnificent birds for me.

Little did I realize that my original interest in waterfowl would eventually result in the release of the world's rarest swans into the wild and contribute to their numbers. To have the opportunity to observe migrating Trumpeters during their winter stay and to see their increase in numbers in Oklahoma is a dream that I never thought possible.

There have been other pleasures, like visiting the TTSS headquarters and knowing and communicating with the Hennepin Park-TTSS staff of Larry Gillette, Donna Compton, and Madeleine Linck.

In conclusion, it has taken a long time and a great deal of work from many biologists and other dedicated individuals to accumulate the knowledge and succeed with the Interior Population of Trumpeters. I am especially thankful, and have a great deal of pride, that I was able to contribute, to learn, and to be a small part of this program of restoration of the Trumpeter.

#### **LITERATURE CITED**

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