

IS MIGRATION NECESSARY FOR RESTORATION OF TRUMPETER SWANS IN THE MIDWEST?

Laurence N. Gillette, Three Rivers Park District, 12615 County Road 9, Suite 100, Plymouth, MN 55441

I have been working with Trumpeter Swans in the Midwest for the past 32 years. My involvement with the migration effort started in 1984, when 31 swans migrated for the first time from Hennepin Parks in east central Minnesota. Since then, I have attended Flyway Technical Committee meetings, toured southern states to assess winter habitat, co-hosted meetings for swan managers to try to develop a coordinated plan and presented papers on migration at four of the last five Trumpeter Swan Society Conferences.

Restoration of breeding flocks of Trumpeter Swans in the upper Midwest has been extremely successful. Population objectives for breeding birds have been met for almost every flock. However, efforts to restore flocks that are migratory have been marginal at best. I am frustrated, primarily because I believe we have the biological knowledge to be successful, but we lack the political will to do it. While everyone appears to agree on the merits of establishing a migratory population, few are willing to embrace aggressive measures to achieve that goal. The objective for migration in the Management Plan for the Interior Population (IP) of Trumpeter Swans states "Encourage the development of migratory behavior by IP swans in response to suitable habitat and climatic conditions." This objective leaves a lot of latitude on what to do, but overall the Management Plan is excellent. Unfortunately, it has not been implemented. In recent years, only Iowa and Arkansas have made significant efforts to promote migration, and I commend them for their efforts.

There have been numerous political obstacles to achieving the goal of a migratory population of Trumpeter Swans. No one group is completely responsible, but everyone can share some responsibility. Some examples appear below.

- The Trumpeter Swan Society's Board of Directors has been split on the merits of winter swan viewing areas and the use of supplemental feeding to create these areas and facilitate migration. In addition, the Society has not been able to reach a consensus on how to resolve the hunter liability issue, and the potential impact trumpeters could have on Tundra Swan hunting, which leaves state waterfowl managers concerned.

- Trumpeter Swan restoration managers have not addressed the migration effort aggressively beyond their own state lines, nor have they come to any consensus on what should be done.
- Flyway waterfowl managers are apprehensive about having Trumpeter Swans in their states, fearing that they will require additional management effort and could interfere with established waterfowl seasons, especially Tundra Swan hunting.
- The United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which has responsibility for migratory birds, has basically side-stepped the issue for the IP by stating it will provide assistance, but will not take the lead.
- Non-government conservation organizations have remained relatively silent, except for time spent debating the original range of Trumpeter Swans and whether the program should be called restoration or introduction.
- Private citizens are the strength of the program, but too few of them are even aware that they could have Trumpeter Swans wintering in their areas or know how they can help to achieve this goal.
- And, obviously, I have done a poor job in rallying all these groups to embrace procedures that are needed to develop a migratory population.

With all these divergent opinions, it is easy to see why very little has been accomplished.

Once trumpeters establish migratory routes and traditions, they adhere to them faithfully, bringing their offspring with them. It will be much more difficult to get the established flocks of swans to migrate to south today, since they are already familiar with other destinations.

In my opinion, the most significant missed opportunities in efforts to restore migratory flocks of Trumpeter Swans was the reluctance to use

supplemental feeding to entice trumpeters to stay at southern locations when they made exploratory migrations during the early phases of most restorations. Almost all of the released swans had been raised in captivity, and had been fed on a diet of corn and pellets. Since they had no history of migration, they wandered south in a random fashion, searching for places to spend the winter that resembled what they had become familiar with in the past. It would have been so easy to feed these birds for several years until they had developed a tradition for migration, passed that tradition on to their offspring and learned how to live in the new landscapes they found. However, feeding was discouraged in most situations for a variety of reasons, such as the fear of the birds becoming more habituated to people. This concern has since proven to be unfounded, and it will be discussed further later in this paper. The pioneering swans wandered from place to place and many died. Those that survived finally settled on wintering locations where they were fed, which were generally in the north. Trumpeters were fed at a few locations like Heber Springs, Arkansas. The swans returned to this site in greater numbers each year, as was mentioned in a previous presentation (Linck *et al.* in press).

I am an unapologetic supporter of the use of supplemental feeding as a way to achieve a migratory population. Feeding has been used to attract and hold trumpeters at numerous locations in ways that do not alter the behavior of the birds towards people, especially during the non-winter months. Trumpeters do not behave as Canada Geese or Mute Swans do, even when they are fed in winter. However, I think a distinction has to be made between intentional wildlife habituation and attracting wildlife to a specific site. Swan feeding all year long through close contact with people could alter the behavior of the birds. Fortunately, there are ways swans can be attracted to a site without habituating them to people. This has been demonstrated almost everywhere that swans over-winter in the north, but it was not recognized during the earlier restoration efforts.

It would be tremendous if sufficient natural winter habitat could be restored to support IP trumpeters and other waterfowl. However, humanity seems incapable of controlling its own growth or achieving any lasting improvements for wildlife. Natural winter habitat for waterfowl in the southern Midwest today consists almost exclusively of agricultural fields, not wetlands. These fields consist of waste grain or green crops of winter wheat and rye. It takes time for trumpeters to adapt to new conditions, and I am not convinced that they are very well suited for

the types of agricultural feeding that is available in the Midwest.

I also support the development of winter viewing areas for trumpeters and perhaps other waterfowl near urban centers, similar to the waterfowl sanctuaries in Europe. These sites can serve as migratory destinations, provide wonderful opportunities for the public to view these magnificent birds in a semi-natural setting, increase the survival of the swans, and reduce interference with waterfowl seasons. Jim King spoke about this opportunity at TTSS 15th Conference presentation in 1995. "We must find ways to allow crowds of people to enjoy swans. We need swan refuges with visitor centers near big cities for public viewing and education." (King 1996) Trumpeter Swans are not game birds, and their management should reflect their different status.

The American public is becoming more disconnected from the natural world every day despite increased efforts at environmental education. While some people think winter feeding sites increase this disconnect, I think they can provide a way to expose people to some of the wonders of the natural world that could generate support for waterfowl and wetland management and other environmental issues with people who would otherwise be lost.

My endorsement of the use of supplemental feeding and the creation of viewing areas for trumpeters poses an interesting question in light of the reluctance to use either of these techniques in the south. Is it important to get trumpeter swans to migrate? There are numerous places in the north with open water all winter, either of natural or manmade origin. Trumpeters are not bothered by extreme winter temperatures. The swans are already migrating to these sites, and the flocks are flourishing as a result of the birds' use of these sites. Even in the north, trumpeters use the sites for only 4 months each winter. The chances of concentrations of trumpeters contracting diseases are probably less on the frozen tundra than they would be in the south. Keeping trumpeters permanently in the north reduces logistical and political problems associated with migration tremendously. The Mississippi River at Monticello and the Toronto waterfront are examples of wintering sites in the north where trumpeters thrive and where the public has wonderful opportunities to view the swans.

Are there advantages to having a migratory population that are worth pursuing in light of all the obstacles? Of course, trumpeters migrated in the

past. Migration gives trumpeters a chance to adapt to more “natural” agricultural foods, which could reduce the need for supplemental feeding, but may increase conflicts with farmers. Viewing swans would be more comfortable in the south. The swans could be viewed by a larger audience, which could generate more support for habitat preservation.

Are these advantages sufficient to justify the continued effort that would be necessary to get trumpeters to migrate? I am interested in your response.

Swan flocks are continuing to grow in almost all locations in the Midwest. If we accept the current winter distribution for trumpeters, it will probably be necessary to increase the number of wintering sites in the north. It may also be necessary to re-evaluate population objectives for flocks of trumpeters that rely exclusively on natural winter food supplies. The question shifts from how many breeding pairs a region can support to how many swans the winter habitat can support for the long term? For example, how many trumpeters can spend the winter on streams in Nebraska before the habitat is compromised? Where will the swans go if these streams are over-grazed? There are no similar sites to the south. And, what impact will over grazing have on other wildlife? Supplemental feeding at this location would only make the situation worse for the naturally occurring vegetation. Feeding sites would have to be set up far enough away that the swans would not make daily flights between sites.

The private sector can play and has played a very important role in the management of Trumpeter Swans. The restoration program in Iowa is a perfect example (Andrews and Hoffman, in press). These efforts can easily be extended to managing wintering sites, which would reduce requirements for state officials. I think the possibilities for public participation have been overlooked by most wildlife managers.

A working session for swan managers in the Midwest is scheduled for tonight to discuss what should be done about migration. Anyone is welcome to sit in. I have my personal opinions, but I am sure everyone else does also. There have been several similar sessions in the past, but to date there has not been a consensus on what should be done. I am hopeful that our increased experience with swan behavior may have changed some peoples’ opinions on what can or should be done.

LITERATURE CITED

- Andrews, R. and D. Hoffman. In press. Iowa’s Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program – A 2005 update. *In* M. H. Linck and R. E. Shea, editors. Selected Papers of the Twentieth Trumpeter Swan Society Conference. North American Swans 33(1).
- King, J. 1996. Trying to understand what swans think about, especially winter habitat. Pages 41-43 *in* M. H. Linck and D. C. Compton, editors. Proceedings and papers of the Fifteenth Trumpeter Swan Society Conference. The Trumpeter Swan Society, Maple Plain, Minnesota, USA.
- Linck, M., K. Rowe, and J. Mosby. In press. The Trumpeter Swans of Heber Springs, Cleburne County, Arkansas. *In* M. H. Linck and R. E. Shea, editors. Selected Papers of the Twentieth Trumpeter Swan Society Conference. North American Swans 33(1).