

THE TRUMPETER SWANS OF MONTICELLO, MINNESOTA

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I am Sheila Lawrence and I live next to the Mississippi River in Monticello, Minnesota. Our stretch of the Mississippi has been a winter home for hundreds of ducks and geese since the start up of Monticello's nuclear power plant in the 1960's. During normal winters the warm water discharge keeps the river open for approximately 6 miles down stream. When winters are mild, the river remains open for 10, perhaps 20 miles.

We moved to Monticello in 1984. I enjoyed watching the ducks and geese and started putting corn out for them. One evening in 1985, I was watching the local news and they had a segment about a Trumpeter Swan being released. A woman was carrying a huge swan and when she got to the water she set it down and let it go. The swan took off running across the water flapping its wings the whole time. I was amazed at such a sight and thought wouldn't it be wonderful to work with those beautiful swans? You know the old saying, "Careful what you wish for, you just might get it." Little did I know then what fate had in store for me or just how much the Trumpeter Swans would change my life.

When I started seeing swans on the river I called around to report the sightings and was put in touch with Donna Compton. Once I met Donna in person, I realized it was her I had seen on the news that night. For those of you who didn't know Donna, she was a wildlife technician for Hennepin Parks and a very active member of The Trumpeter Swan Society. We all miss her dearly.

Fifteen swans wintered in Monticello for the first time during the season of 1987-88. By 1994, the count had grown to 90 swans and Donna asked how I would feel if sometime in the future there would be more than 300 swans wintering here. I clearly remember saying, "Donna, that would be wonderful, but I don't think I would be able to feed that many birds." I guess I never realized how far I'd go for those magnificent swans. Last winter it was estimated that over 1100 trumpeters were on our stretch of the river. This winter will mark the 19th year that the swans have graced our shores.

The swans come to Monticello when the lakes and ponds in our area are freezing over which has been as early as November 1st and as late as December 20th.

At first they come in gradually and then sometimes there can be an increase of 400 birds in 1 day. It still astonishes me whenever that happens. With the first warm up in February, there is a noticeable drop of four to five hundred swans within a week's time. It is generally reported during the same time frame that an increase of a similar number of swans is observed on the Otter Tail River system, which is northwest of Monticello near the City of Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Based upon this, I am of the opinion that the birds nesting in the northwest area might have established a habit of leaving earlier than the ones from the central area where we are located. During mild winters on our stretch of the river, the majority of swans are here for 6 weeks or less. A person can usually see swans at Monticello from December into March, but I always tell people, "To see the largest number of birds you should come in January, since the other months are "iffy" and weather dependent."

Last year, I fed 1,200 pounds of corn a day when the whole group was here and adjusted it down as they started leaving. I figure the swans got 1,000 pounds daily and the ducks and geese 200 pounds or so. I have been feeding this ratio for the past 3 years. I put the corn in tubs that are high enough that a swan can easily eat from, but a goose has a harder time. Until 2 years ago, I logged countless hours hauling corn down to the river either using a sled or a wagon depending upon how much snow we had. Now, thanks to the insight and generosity of some wonderful people, there is an auger that moves the corn from the gravity wagon that sits in our driveway to the riverbank, a distance of almost 200 feet. With the auger my work has been cut by more than half. It is through this same generosity of private donations that most of the corn being fed is paid for each year.

Based upon my records and information that has been available to me, I feel the attrition rate has been small compared to the number of birds that winter here. The past 10 years have shown an attrition rate of less than 2% per winter with some years being less than 1%. However, I am certain that more swans have probably died on this stretch of the river during this time frame, but their carcasses were never recovered.

Over the past 18 years, my records show there have been 32 deaths caused by lead poisoning. There have been 26 fatalities due to collisions. Twenty-two of

these were with power lines; three swans hit the Highway 25 bridge and one swan hit a water tower. One swan was found dead with its foot caught in a rope that was tied to a cement block. One cygnet died from a lung infection and there were at least seven unknown causes due to the fact that the bodies were either scavenged or I was not informed of the necropsy results. Even though their bodies were not recovered, I believe at least five swans died from extreme ice build up on their collars. I say this because of the conditions I witnessed and the fact that the collared swans did not return to their family groups and were never seen again.

I attempt to catch as many swans “in need” as I can, whether it be the classic “look of lead poisoning”, broken wings or fishing line and lures. There have been several times when I’ve walked up to the house, dripping wet carrying a sick or injured swan and my husband Jim will shake his head and say, “You know Sheila, some day they’re going to find you down at the Coon Rapids Dam.”

Jim and I also check out reports of dead or injured swans in the area at the request of Three Rivers Park District, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) or concerned citizens. We do what we can to help in those situations. Sometimes it involves attempting to catch an injured swan or retrieving a dead one.

Although the swans have had to endure some harsh conditions, generally speaking, life is pretty good for them at Monticello. The swans that winter here appear to be thriving. During the first 10 years, the average increase from 1 year to the next was 38 percent with the lowest year being a minus 10 percent and the highest year being 88 percent. The 88 percent represents an increase in the flock size from 48 to 90 swans. For the past 5 years the average growth from year to year has been 21 percent.

For 18 years, I have kept track of and recorded the number of swans wintering on our stretch of the river. In years past, counting used to be so easy. Now it is challenging to remain focused and to concentrate on achieving a fairly accurate count. I have also kept track of the color and numbers of the collars and wing tags, plus all leg band numbers that I’ve had the opportunity to read with binoculars.

For the most part, the swans are relaxed around me, but they are not tame swans. They are wary of unfamiliar people and situations. In general, seemingly insignificant occurrences will alarm them. This can take the form of someone fishing from

shore, neighbors doing normal activities in their back yards or park visitors going beyond the designated fenced area.

There was a time when I knew the personality of each trumpeter that ate at Sheila’s Diner. It was like a soap opera from year to year. I followed the continuing change in the flock relating to which swan had lost a mate, which one found a mate, how many cygnets did each pair have and which youngsters felt grown up and strong enough to challenge the older birds.

A Hennepin Parks (since renamed Three Rivers Park District) swan, 54NA, spent 13 winters at Monticello and over those years she brought 27 cygnets with her. She died at the age of 19. My all time favorite swan, Minnesota DNR Number 7, spent 14 winters at Monticello and over the years she showed up with a total of 23 cygnets. She died at the age of 17. A cygnet from Number 7’s first brood is MN DNR 9. If she returns this season, it will be her 17th winter at Monticello. Over the past 12 years, MN 9 has done her part to help increase the flock size by having raised 32 cygnets. Together these three remarkable female trumpeters have brought 82 cygnets to winter at Monticello.

My favorite couple was MN 7 and MN 8. They met and fell in love at the Minnesota Zoo and were then given to the Minnesota DNR. The pair was released with plenty of fanfare as that event celebrated the beginning of the DNR’s Trumpeter Swan restoration program. Number 7 was a busybody and liked excitement, always instigating little battles even though she couldn’t fight worth a darn. Number 8, on the other hand, was mellow and easygoing. He was a good fighter and defended her faithfully. The 3rd year, they brought their first cygnet to Monticello, which was MN 9. That same year Number 8 died when he hit the Minnesota State Highway 25 bridge on a windy day. The rest of the season, Number 7 seemed withdrawn, but she must have snapped out of it, because the next year she returned with a new mate and seven cygnets. It was rumored that Number 7 had only six cygnets that year and kidnapped the seventh one. It was good to see her up to her old tricks again. As fate would have it, 2 years later she lost her second mate. The following 2 years she wintered alone, but then, once again, Number 7 returned with a mate and cygnets by her side.

The swans have received plenty of media coverage both on television and in the newspapers. They have been featured on the evening news many times and

on just about every outdoor TV program in the Minnesota area. Last year, an article was written in the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* and was picked up by a news agency and published in newspapers all over the country, even as far away as Hawaii. Word of the Monticello swans has, indeed, gotten around.

For the past 3 years, the Monticello Chamber of Commerce has been promoting the swans for tourism. It must have been fate again, as the city just happened to own a small lot right next door to where I live. They put up a split rail fence and warning signs to keep the swan viewers in the park so they would not disturb the birds. The City put in a walking path to make the winter walk up to the fence easier for the elderly and handicapped. They erected an informational sign about Trumpeter Swans and have a pamphlet and donation box in the park area. Two years ago, in addition to regular advertising, the Chamber of Commerce rented billboard space to catch the attention of travelers on Interstate 94.

Three years ago, a local artist was hired to make a beautiful swan sculpture that is on display outside the Monticello Community Center. Now there is a rumor concerning a plan to put in approximately 20 off-street parking spaces for the swan visitors in order to reduce traffic congestion on our little residential dead-end street. People have come from as far away as California, New York, Texas, and Connecticut to view the swans. The Chamber of Commerce estimated the number of visitors to the City Park last winter at 6,000.

Because of the swans, I have met and enjoyed the company of many interesting and good-hearted people. My life certainly is richer for the experience. The swans have led me on a remarkable journey, one that is still unfolding. I have had the privilege of watching the trumpeters grow from that small flock of 15 in 1987 to over 1,100 this past winter. For 18 years I've witnessed their antics, all the displaying, the trumpeting, courting and mating rituals, all those good fights, and how proud they can be of themselves and their families. To stand on shore at dusk and have 400 trumpeters fly in from all directions and land in front of you is truly an amazing experience. Memories like these I will always treasure. The way I see it, the swans have given me much more than I have given them. I would like to thank each of you for any part you may have played in making all this possible.