

TRUMPETER SWANS FROM A VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE

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I began my second career in 1989 having answered an advertisement from Scott Paper Ltd. outlining a need for funding for a Trumpeter Swan reintroduction program for the Province of Ontario. I was recently retired from the Bank of Montreal due to health problems and felt the need to be involved in more than a financial way, in something that returned a benefit to society.

I answered the ad suggesting that perhaps a physical contribution would be more meaningful and I was referred to a gentleman named Harry Lumsden who suggested that, if I really wanted to be involved, I should dig a pond, fence it, and become a co-operator for the production of cygnet swans for release to the wild.

We owned a farm in Northern Ontario near North Bay and I immediately set about to satisfy his requirements. In the spring of 1990, Harry delivered a pair of captive, magnificent swans for our pond and I was officially a co-operator. It was fun and meaningful, but in the winter of 1993, this became a diminutive part of my Trumpeter Swan involvement.

Harry called in early December to advise that the first Trumpeter Swans to mate in the wild and migrate in Ontario in nearly 200 years were observed in the west basin of Lake Ontario, close to my winter home. Overnight, my life and priorities changed as I became responsible for six cygnets and their parents.

It was imperative that we keep this brood healthy and prevent any further migration south because the danger from power lines and lead poisoning was, in our opinion, a significant impairment to their survival. The swan family thrived and every winter the pair returned with their current year's cygnets and past year siblings until the numbers grew to a point where some structure in our system became necessary.

The need for information regarding nest sites, routes of migration, brood sizes, and health and habitat conditions became more critical and a volunteer group was necessary to provide this information for the overall coordinator of our Province. I knew that we needed many eyes in the sky and province-wide information availability, so I set about to cultivate

birding groups, horticultural groups and all people interested in the preservation of nature and wildlife.

Accomplishing these critical points would require a considerable number of dedicated volunteers. To gain an appreciation for the magnitude of our current volunteer group, in a recent application for a funding grant from the Trillium Foundation of Ontario, our donated hours to the program were valued at \$268,000.00 per year, using \$12.00 (Canadian) per hour to arrive at the total.

Included in the volunteer hours are the co-operator participants who raise cygnets for release to the wild and Ron and Michael Bauman at Fair Lake who cared for and fed the cygnets in the pens owned by the Grand River Conservation Authority for 2 years prior to their release.

Over and above my involvement in the points addressed, it became obvious that we had a requirement for funding to carry on with the valuable work that was being done in the reintroduction program. I was personally involved in securing private funds to assist the swan reintroduction program at Wye Marsh Wildlife Centre (Wye Marsh) in Midland, Ontario, which was a principle release site and to erect a small hospital for recovery of sick and injured swans at that centre.

I was also fundamentally involved in securing a grant from the Trillium Foundation to cover a portion of 4 years of expenses for the Ontario swan program.

To maintain continuity and allegiance, I served on the Board of Directors at Wye Marsh, South Peel Naturalists' Club and the Callander Horticultural Society. I also became a member of the Amhurst Wildlife Foundation, who bank the donations and pay the bills for the Ontario Trumpeter Swan program, as well as a member of Nipissing Naturalists' Club, Friends of Mashkinonje, Royal Botanical Gardens and am an active member of the Bird Wing of Nipissing. I also maintain a working relationship with Canadian Wildlife Service who assists us in reporting bird mortality along the beach strip in the west basin of Lake Ontario.

My volunteer activity has placed me in a close working relationship with the Wild Bird Clinic at the

University of Guelph who provide medical treatment and scientific information on all of the injured and dead Trumpeter Swans.

Several of our volunteers, including myself, are involved in aerial surveillance of nest sites and cygnet counts as well as expanded locations as the swans move further and further into Northern Ontario.

Three dedicated volunteers, my husband Ray, and I are responsible for the winter feeding program in the west basin of Lake Ontario which winters 25% of the total Ontario Trumpeter Swan population.

During the winter 2004/05, our numbers were 132 birds and they, along with some other wintering waterfowl, consumed 2,200 pounds of whole shelled corn. Our winter feeding program is considered essential since our numbers are fragile and we wish to prohibit further southward migration until we have a self sustaining population of trumpeters. At the winter feeding site, our volunteers assist in sexing, banding and tagging, throughout the winter months.

The over-wintering program has provided me with the opportunity to spend considerable time with the trumpeters. I have had the leisure to befriend and study behaviour patterns of parents, families, and individuals on their own. Some of my observations have been unique and considered valuable by Harry Lumsden who is the recipient of this information.

Further into my involvement with the feeding program, I was able to collect data on a particularly hazardous stretch of west basin beach between Burlington and Hamilton, a direct swan flyway from Lake Ontario to Burlington Bay along which run several strands of high tension power lines.

With the assistance of the Canadian Wildlife Service and South Peel Naturalists' Club, we had positive meetings with Ontario Hydro One who, after

reviewing the facts we presented, agreed to place bird flight diverters on their lines by the Burlington Bridge, which resulted in a substantial reduction of mortality of all bird types, including swans.

In 2002, it was determined that Lake Nipissing near North Bay in northern Ontario would be an ideal release site for Trumpeter Swans and, over the next 3 years, 26 swans were released in that area.

I am particularly gratified that the Bell Telephone Company of Canada, that is responsible for all phone services, considered our project important enough to place a pair of magnificent Trumpeter Swans on the cover of their 2006 telephone listing edition for the entire North Bay area. North Bay is my birthplace.

The Ontario program has been very successful. We currently have 523 free-flying birds and 82 pairs of breeding age and are nearing our objective for a self sustaining population.

These 15 years have been wonderful, fulfilling, and gratifying, giving me an overall feeling of returning something back to the world.

My mentor, benefactor, and very dear friend Harry Lumsden was rightfully awarded the Order of Canada for his tireless efforts in bringing the Trumpeter Swans back to Ontario. This is the highest recognition in our country for an individual and Harry has many times credited the entire success of the program to our strong and dedicated volunteers.

It is a pleasure and an honour to present this information to you, a dedicated group who are overall responsible for the successful reintroduction and protection of one of the magnificent birds of North America and I am pleased to play a small part in such an overwhelming success.