

The River Current News

Jenn Dean

Nature Notes:

Rare Swans Grace Valley until March

By now you've seen them: arch-necked, white beauties feeding in the fallow fields of Carnation and Duvall. Or heard them: their tinny-sounding toy trumpet murmurings as they forage on winter grasses and seeds. We are fortunate to host again this cold season not just the usual sprinkling of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus Buccinator*), but a good-sized flock of over a hundred swans. Wintering over in Washington State, before returning to their Alaskan breeding grounds, the largest population settles in the Skagit Valley (3100), about 400 settle in Snohomish County, and some visit the Snoqualmie Valley. On a recent sunlit morning outside the Starbucks in Carnation a group of about 20 Trumpeters flew over, and in the last few weeks a mixed flock of geese and over 100 swans foraged in the fields at Remlinger Farms (anectodally a fellow bird-watcher there told me he had never seen so many in his 31 years here in the valley).

North America's largest swan, they were once nearly extinct due to hunting, poisoning, and habitat loss--more than half of America's wetlands have disappeared since the Europeans settled. With a wingspan of 80" or six and a half feet, Trumpeter adults bear snow-white plumage, a black bill, and black legs and feet. The juveniles sport a wash of gray plumage and pink bill patches. Enormous, they are often seen with their cousins, the native Tundra Swan (*Cygnus Columbianus*), who also winter here, although Tundras appear smaller and more goose-like. Tundra adults have yellow lores, or patches, on the base of their bill. Often hard to tell apart from the

Tundras at a distance, the tell-tale Trumpeter identification remains the gentle nasal trumpeting, a blanket of constant sound rising over the flock as they feed on pasture grass, after-harvest crops, and seeds. At night they roost on lakes or sloughs, their enormous white forms floating silently on the dark waters.

Although Trumpeter populations have increased, they still face lead poisoning, and increasingly, power line collisions in Washington State. Many waterfowl ingest small stones to use as grit in their gizzards, a way of grinding food for digestion, and lead pellets from shotguns—perfect size for digestion grit although illegal now for waterfowl hunting in Washington State, can remain in the fields for years. As a pro-hunter environmentalist, I recommend non-toxic shot for all hunting. Lead shot (and lead sinkers) are toxic for raptors, loons, and all wildlife when left in the environment, and a few non-toxic alternatives have been developed. If you hunt or allow hunting on your land, please consider using non-toxic ammunition.

Trumpeters have been dying off in large numbers in recent years as a result of lead poisoning. Canadian and US Wildlife officials have been studying to find out where the swans are picking up the lead shot, and as a result radio-tracking collars have been placed on some swans. It's recommended when watching Trumpeters to watch from a distance. Trumpeters and Tundra swans have to take in enormous numbers of calories to stay warm, put on weight for their migration back to Alaska, and generally stay healthy. Disturbing a flock by approaching too closely will cause them to interrupt their feeding and possibly fly into power lines. Birds can then become more vulnerable to disease and stress. (This not only applies to swans;

when walking on the beach in spring or fall, those myriad shorebirds—Sandpipers, Dunlins, Willets, Turnstones—are on the borderline of survival: they are scarfing down as many calories as possible, having dropped down out of the sky burning with hunger, on their way to Argentina or Alaska).

Enjoy these rare Trumpeters until March, when they make their journey back to Alaska to breed. Swans have been recorded migrating at 27,000 feet, their strong wings moving on a ribbon of thin air (in comparison geese generally migrate at 1 to 5,000 feet). Upon arrival on their breeding grounds, they'll build ground nests, and lay a clutch of creamy white eggs. Before the young even hatch, under some primordial urge, the mother swans will make low calls to the chicks, who will respond in kind while still in their eggshells.

Enjoy these amazing creatures while they still grace our waterways and skyways. Check the farm fields in the valley by Duvall (River Road, or as you take 203 up to Monroe), and Remlinger Farms in Carnation. If you happen to look up and see a line of white miracles, listen for the gentle toy-trumpet sounds for which they are named. For more information, go to www.trumpeterswansociety.org, which also has a link to the Washington Swan Working Group.

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