

Not Ready for His Swan Song

Improbable survival tales aren't unique to humans. A venerable trumpeter swan nicknamed Solo has become a legend at Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge in Washington, where he is the lone survivor of a once-resident flock. Biologists believe the long-lived bird may be one of the original cygnets introduced to Turnbull Refuge in the 1960s.

The idea then was to protect the species by spreading it through more of its historic range. Conservationists brought in groups of swans from Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Montana until Turnbull's spring population peaked at almost 30 birds in 1976. That year, the refuge stopped supplemental feeding and pond aeration in hopes that the swans would find a more hospitable winter habitat and then return in the spring. It didn't work. The birds scattered; some were shot, some eaten by predators, some flew into power lines, some succumbed to drought.

By 1980, there was only one active breeding pair – including Solo. Then Solo's mate was killed – probably by a coyote – in 1988. In 1992, a new female joined Solo. The pair built a nest platform but laid no eggs. The female disappeared in 1994 and no regular family group has formed since then.

Biologists estimate Solo's age at between 43 and 46 – ancient in swan years; few swans live past 30. Solo's collar fell off four years ago, but refuge staff knows him by his behavior. “He shows up here soon after thaw before any other swans are on the refuge,” says refuge biologist Mike Rule, “and then he's here throughout the summer, long after all other swans have left. He's tied to this one wetland, where he had nested with his mate and where she was killed, and he defends it against all comers. He doesn't really bother with ducks, but boy, he just won't tolerate Canada geese.”

Solo resides year-round at Turnbull Refuge, leaving briefly only when the water freezes.