

Trumpeter swan cygnets shipped to Iowa for swan restoration program

by Liz Jozwiak

Some of the most interesting wildlife observations are reported to us by residents from the local area. We welcome the calls that are received year-round about a rare bird sighting along the Kenai River, the albino moose, or the report of a chickadee with a deformed billed. Many times the calls report injured birds or wildlife that are in peril, or have been unintentionally harmed by humans (electrocutions, vehicle strikes). At times there is little we can do, and the outcome is not always favorable. Yet on June 18th with the help of several concerned citizens, we were able to turn a bleak situation into a happier ending.

On that day I received a call from a local resident about an interesting and rarely witnessed interaction between several Trumpeter swans on his lake. This interaction resulted in the death of one of the nesting adults, and the abandonment of the brood of young swans (called cygnets).

I was very interested in this resident's report since this lake, along with others on the Peninsula, has been surveyed annually for Trumpeter Swans since the 1960s. This was a lake that historically had been very successful at producing cygnets, and has likely been occupied by the same pair of nesting Trumpeter swans for many years.

I was told that the two adult swans returned to the lake this spring, nested, and hatched a brood of five cygnets around the first week of June. Then another pair of swans landed on the lake and decided not to leave. Nesting Trumpeter swans will vigorously defend their lake from intruders. Most of the time the nesting pair is successful at driving away any visiting swans that land in their territory. This is apparently what the nesting male swan (also known as the cob) tried to do; his wing was broken as a result of these repeated confrontations and it did not survive the attacks.

Now with one of the nesting adults out of the way, the intruding pair of swans began to harass the female swan (known as the pen) that had stayed with the cygnets. The lake resident witnessed the intruding swans forcing the pen off the lake and into the woods,

causing her to abandon the cygnets. The pen was seen departing the lake on June 17th; the fate of the 10-day-old cygnets was unknown.

I arrived the next day to collect the dead male swan as a study specimen. I found the cob dead along the shoreline with multiple injuries to its body and wing. At this point I thought it was very unlikely that the young cygnets would survive on their own as they are unable to dive to avoid predators.

We found three of the five young cygnets still alive. These little cygnets were about the size of my hand, and they had paddled their way that night about 1 mile across the lake to a little cove. I found evidence that avian predators probably killed the other two cygnets.

As wildlife biologists, we are trained to let "nature takes its course" especially when Trumpeter Swans here in Alaska are both healthy and thriving. I however, found this to be an opportunity to help supplement one of the three ongoing Trumpeter swan restoration projects in the lower 48 states where Trumpeter swans are still considered to be rare in many parts of the United States.

Trumpeter swans from Alaska are especially sought as they can provide the genetic diversity needed for the establishment of healthy Midwestern swan populations. Also, Alaskan swans have proven migratory instincts that will enable Midwestern stock to develop migratory traditions.

Both Ron Andrews and Dave Hoffman, coordinators of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Swan Restoration Project were very willing to acquire these cygnets for rearing and release in Northern Iowa. Iowa's Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program began in 1993. To date, Iowa has released 572 Trumpeter swans. Its banded swans have been reported in 15 states and two Canadian provinces.

The three cygnets were collected and transferred to Cindy Sherlock, a local wildlife rehabilitator who, along with several others individuals, took excellent care of them until we were able to coordinate a transfer on June 28, 2005 to Iowa. These three cygnets will later join another Trumpeter swan brood arriv-

ing from Washington State for rearing and eventual release in Northern Iowa.

For additional information on Trumpeter Swan Restoration efforts in Iowa, see the following web sites: <http://www.iowadnr.com>, the ISU Trumpeter Swan Committee <http://www.stuorg.iastate.edu/swan/>, and the Trumpeter Swan Society <http://www.trumpeterswansociety.org>

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