

Aerial swan survey evokes memories and visions of change on the Kenai

by Ted Bailey

I recently participated as an observer on an aerial survey of trumpeter swans on the Kenai Peninsula. The survey was part of a larger statewide aerial survey that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts throughout Alaska for trumpeter swans every five years. Trumpeter swans were first identified in Alaska in 1954. Although they were removed from the National Endangered Species list in 1968, the Fish and Wildlife Service still has responsibility for coordinating the conservation of this largest and most majestic species of waterfowl in North America, along with other migratory birds that fly across international and state boundaries.

I was invited by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service waterfowl biologist Bill Larned to accompany him as a volunteer flying over the numerous lakes, ponds, beaver ponds, and small streams of the Kenai Peninsula. My task was to look for swans from my side of the aircraft and to record our data on a computer via a touch screen mounted on the cockpit instrument panel. This was a sophisticated system that constantly kept track of our aircraft position and plotted our travel route on a detailed topographic map showing the lakes and streams on the Kenai.

The noise reduction headsets were a special pleasure to wear during the long flights.

This swan survey was vastly different from the first aerial trumpeter swan survey I helped conduct on the refuge back in the 1970s. I had just recently begun working for the refuge; I was not yet adapted to tightly circling in small aircraft and was unfamiliar with the names and locations of many of the lakes on the peninsula. I sat in the back seat of a Supercub with a huge roll topographic map on my lap as the pilot, the late Vern Berns, circled numerous lakes and ponds. My job was to look for swans and accurately record our observations on the topographic maps with a pencil. Vern would shout into my headset over the noise of the engine, "Two adults and four cygnets on a small lake about one mile southwest of Hook Lake." I had no idea where Hook Lake was back then and by time I found it on the correct map, we were already tightly

circling another lake depicted on another map. I soon developed a case of airsickness looking for unfamiliar lakes on numerous maps, scanning the swiftly passing lakes below us for swans, and trying to remember where the horizon was the last time I was fortunate enough to see it. Vern never let me forget that first swan survey we flew together.

As we flew this year across the Tustumena Benchlands I thought of my former neighbor and past refuge manager John Hakala. John once told me about his first view of the then Kenai National Moose Range. At that time he was a young pilot flying a B-25 Mitchell bomber during the early years of World War II. Stationed temporarily in Anchorage before going out to the Aleutians, he was told one day to conduct a test flight on a B-25 that needed checked out. John remembered that in 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt had established the Kenai National Moose Range, so he chose to conduct his B-25 test flight over the new Moose Range. Flying low over the Benchlands in his B-25, John was impressed with the pristine, wilderness landscape and the large numbers of moose he saw from the air. He vowed that if he survived the war, he would someday return to the Kenai Peninsula. John survived the war despite many dangers he encountered flying from the stormy Aleutians Islands and later from air bases in the Southwest Pacific. After going to college in Michigan and the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, John eventually returned to the Kenai Peninsula to become one of the early refuge managers. John now lives in Fairbanks.

When Bill and I flew over a remote, small, unnamed pond in the northern refuge I remembered how Ed Bangs and I spent one night in an inflatable canoe on the pond trying to capture a flightless, molting trumpeter swan with a salmon net in order to replace its old, fractured and deteriorating neck band. This particular swan had not only been documented returning to the same pond on the Kenai Peninsula year after year, it was also regularly seen on its wintering grounds in the Skagit River Valley north of Seattle, Washington. Using the cover of darkness that didn't

begin until about midnight we paddled back and forth across the pond in pursuit of the adept-swimming swan and finally captured it about 3:00 AM in the morning and successfully replaced its neckband. Ed Bangs later transferred to Montana where he led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program to reintroduce wolves into Yellowstone National Park.

As we flew over Pollard Lake, I thought of George Pollard who as a young boy had come to the Kenai with his father in the 1930s. George has had many unique opportunities since then to observe trumpeter swan behavior at close range on an almost daily basis on the lake bearing his family name. Still active today he has witnessed the many changes that have occurred on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and the Kenai Peninsula in his lifetime.

Some of these changes have affected the whole Kenai Peninsula and are related to the warming climate; changes that I also witnessed during the past nearly thirty years. These include the rapid retreat of Skilak Glacier and other smaller glaciers and the margins of the Harding Icefield. Snow no longer remains on some mountaintops during the summer. Other changes include the shrinking of lakes, ponds and wetlands with sedges, grasses, shrubs and young trees replacing what was once water. Vast forests of formerly dark-green spruce trees are now gray with dead trees after outbreaks of spruce bark beetles have taken their toll, triggered by warm temperatures and drought-stressed trees.

An aerial perspective, unlike our daily ground-based perspective, also provides vivid evidence of the rapid expansion of human activity on the Kenai Peninsula. Where perhaps less than fifty cabins existed in the Caribou Hills on lands adjacent to the refuge in the 1970s, there are now literally hundreds resembling a spread-out suburb connected by numerous ATV

trails rather than roads. Roads and houses now exist where there was once unbroken forest adjacent to the refuge in Sterling Corridor and North Kenai areas. And in contrast to the 1970s there are relatively few areas along the banks of the Lower Kenai River that are free of houses or cabins. Fortunately this development stops at refuge boundary. From the air, the distinction between the “undeveloped” and still mostly pristine refuge lands and adjacent “developed” lands is increasingly and vividly apparent.

With perhaps the exception of a diminishing number of “old pilots” few of us on the Kenai Peninsula get a chance for a birds-eye view of the rapid changes occurring on the landscape around us. One does not gain the same perspective of our more and more human-dominated landscape while driving along roads because such development is often screened from our ground-based view by trees. When my private pilot license was current, I enjoyed flying high above the refuge to look down on its serene lakes, forests, mountains and glaciers and thinking, “This was what the entire Kenai Peninsula probably looked like not that long ago.” And I was then, and still am grateful that we can still experience untouched nature either on the ground or high above the refuge. My hope is that people will continue to treasure the uniqueness of the refuge, its fish and wildlife, and its pristine wilderness and beauty on our rapidly changing and increasingly human-dominated Kenai Peninsula.

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