

# BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

## Trumpeter Swan

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The Sax-Zim Bog is home to some impressive avian species. People come to the area during the coldest parts of the year to be dazzled by Great Gray Owls and winter finches. Some even brave the mosquitoes and black flies for Connecticut Warblers and 100 species days during the summer months. Today, we profile perhaps the largest bird in the Sax-Zim Bog: Trumpeter Swan!

Trumpeter Swans are an absolutely impressive bird. They are the largest species of waterfowl in North America, weighing up to 25 pounds with a wingspan exceeding 6 feet. Their bright white plumage sticks out against the stands of cattails and bulrushes on the shallow lakes and ponds they prefer for nesting. But, perhaps most impressive is the conservation story of this species.

This species was extirpated from the state of Minnesota by the 1880's due to overharvest for feathers, food, and skins. In fact, the last nesting pair documented in the state, prior to reestablishment was 1885! In the 1930's only 69 Trumpeter

Swans remained in the lower-48 and were seemingly on a path to extinction.

Reestablishment of this species in Minnesota began in the 1960's, with a breeding flock started by the Three Rivers Park District. Large scale restoration for this species in Minnesota started in the 1980's, following the establishment of the Non-game Wildlife Program. The lineage of many of Minnesota's Trumpeter Swans starts with egg collections from Alaska in 1986 under the guidance from Minnesota's first Non-game Wildlife Program Director Carrol Henderson. At the publication of Minnesota's Endangered Flora and Fauna by Coffin and Pfannmuller in 1988, this species was still listed as extirpated in the state due to a lack of an established migratory population.

Fortunately, work has been done and has continued to support this species through wetland conservation efforts, reestablishment, and study. In 2015, the population of Trumpeter Swans in greater Minnesota was surveyed, with over 17,000 individuals counted! Though populations are increasing, Trumpeter Swans are still of conservation need due impacts from lead poisoning.

Trumpeter Swans rely on shallow wetlands, with abundant aquatic vegetation. The starchy tubers of cattails and arrowhead are important parts of the diet of this large bird. Trumpeter Swans utilize old muskrat and beaver lodges for nesting platforms and the increased population of these species can also be linked to the successfully recovery of Trumpeter Swans. In the Sax-Zim Bog,

Stone Lake, East Stone Lake, and Goldfish Lake provide this exact habitat for swans in the Sax-Zim Bog and often have at least one nesting pair between the lakes.

If you are interested in learning more of the history of Trumpeter Swan Conservation in Minnesota checkout the Recovery Timeline from the Minnesota DNR here:

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/.../trumpeterswan/index.html>

or read the retelling of this conservation success story through Carrol Henderson's eyes here:

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/.../trumpeter-swan-history.html>

More information about this amazing species included in the photos below!

(Photos below by Sparky Stensaas)



Trumpeter Swans are the only swan that breeds in Minnesota. One good way to ID this species from its cousin, Tundra Swan, is to look at the bill! Trumpeter Swans usually have all black bills, with a wide patch of skin in front of their eyes. Their crown feathers often meet the bill base in a V-shape.



This Trumpeter Swan family is swimming through their preferred shallow lake habitat! Trumpeter Swans mostly pair for life, with 3-6 eggs being a typical brood. Pairs of swans will use the same nesting site from one year to the next.



Young Trumpeter Swans can be hard to ID from young Tundra Swans during migration. However, young Trumpeter Swans have dark bill bases, where young Tundra Swans have all pink bill bases!



The conservation story of this species is still unfolding and you can still see birds with neck bands and leg bands flying to this day. Be sure to report all banded swans (and other birds) to the Bird Banding Laboratory: <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBL/bblretrv/>.



In migration, Trumpeter Swans typically fly in family groups or pairs, no larger than about 8-10 birds. If you see a group of swans of more than about 10, you probably are seeing Tundra Swans! The vocalizations of these two species are quite different and can be a helpful tool for ID in flight! Tundra Swans typically start showing up in Minnesota in the last week of October to the first week of November.



In the winter, Trumpeter Swans migrate far enough south to find food. Historically, this species wintered as far south as Mexico.

This photo, from Stone Lake in the Spring, shows what these robust swans might expect on their wintering grounds. In some cases, pockets of open water along rivers or streams offer enough food for these large birds.