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JULY/AUGUST 2014

*Sound the  
trumpet*

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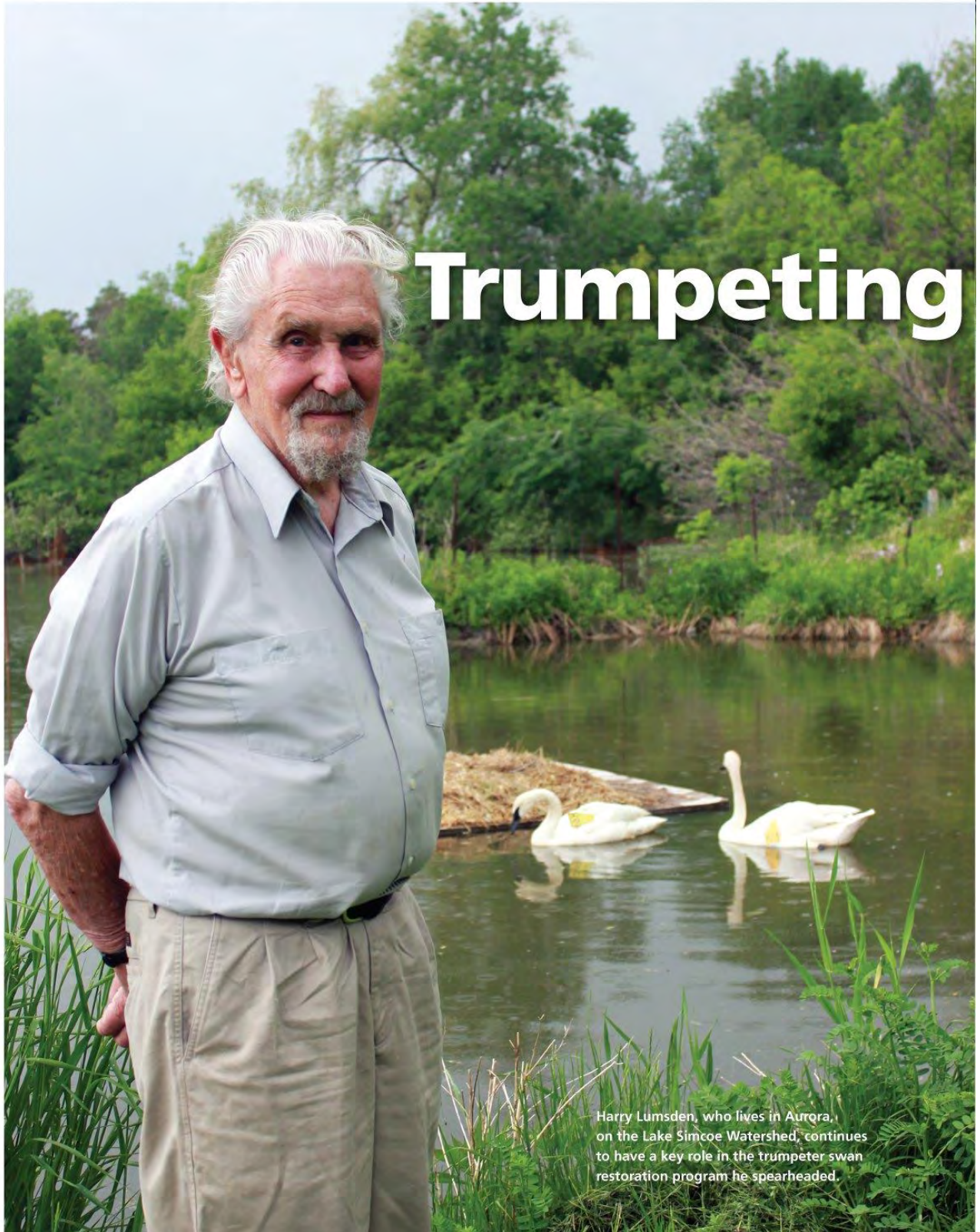


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SPECIAL SECTION: 4 FABULOUS SPLASH FESTIVALS



# Trumpeting

Harry Lumsden, who lives in Aurora, on the Lake Simcoe Watershed, continues to have a key role in the trumpeter swan restoration program he spearheaded.



*Harry Lumsden is a modest man – not one to boast about bringing back the trumpeter swan*

BY VALERIE PRING

Over the years, I have written many stories about fascinating men and women who have dedicated their lives to making our world a better place. From artists to environmentalists, they share a common thread — a relentless determination to complete their mission. When you ask them why they did it, they usually say, “because it needed to be done.” As I sit at my table to tell you about Harry Lumsden, this remarkable Aurora resident who re-introduced trumpeter swans into Ontario, I am lost for words in trying to describe the most, modest man I have ever met!

Harry has a wonderful ability to deflect recognition and, truthfully, I believe that he agreed to my interview only to bring attention to his swans — yet he has such a fascinating legacy that this story would be incomplete unless I speak of his character. He is now a retired district biologist from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources who has received not only an Ontario Lieutenant Governor’s award, but also the Order of Canada for his work with swans, which began shortly before his retirement in 1988 and continues to this day. In as much as great musicians become the music, the same can be said for Harry — he is the swan! Beyond Harry’s skin, there is strength in leadership and a sheer magnificence that is unassuming and pure.

Harry was born in Scotland, and was stationed in Canada for three years during the Second World War. He acquired his pilot’s licence here and became a flying instructor. After the war, he was posted to Japan with the occupational forces and stayed there until 1947. He could not shake his love for Canada, and returned

a year later to begin a lifetime career with the MNR as a biologist.

Harry was born with a passion for birds.

“I’ve always been interested in birds right from being a small child,” he says. “I remember fairly vividly when I was about four years old, being taken by my father to look at a song thrush nest. The bird was flying around making alarm calls.”

As a naturalist, Harry was particularly interested in waterfowl and grouse, but he also did extensive work with deer and fur bearers such as muskrat, and he travelled a lot to very remote areas.

“I had a lovely wife, and have three great children,” he says, looking back on that time in his life. “They must have had a rough time because I did spend a lot of time in the field.”

With no post-secondary education, Harry says he was fortunate to be hired by MNR. It wasn’t until the late 1940s that employers started requiring diplomas and degrees. Harry’s lack of post-secondary education never held him back, however. His knowledge and abilities as a biologist are so extensive that even now in his later years, he is recognized as a leading world expert on grouse and waterfowl, and continues to have a key role in the trumpeter swan restoration program that he spearheaded. He actively documents all swan activity, and writes and presents scientific papers at international conferences.

The trumpeter swan is native to North America. During pioneer days, people believed the birds had been hunted to extinction with the introduction of firearms. It is estimated that more than 108,000 swan skins were purchased by the Hudson Bay Co. and then sold in the U.K. for powder puffs, quill pens, clothing trim and cured leather purses. In 1886, the last known swan at that time was shot

## LAKE SIMCOE PEOPLE

at Long Point, Ont. In 1932, however, a small pocket of swans was discovered and placed under government protection. Many years later, some were also discovered in Alberta, Yukon and Alaska.

Harry recalls that in 1979, the Endangered Species legislation was formalized in Ontario. It included the wild turkey, and the peregrine falcon, which had been lost here.

"The province started working on the wild turkeys, the federal government on peregrine falcons, and we at the MNR started on the trumpeter swans in 1982."

That year, Harry got his first shipment of 23 eggs from Alberta. The re-introduction of swans was done through offering cygnets to pond owners in Ontario, with the hope of establishing breeding pairs. When Harry retired six years later, he took the program with him. It became privately funded through Harry's efforts.

"I have had a lot of help over the years. I used to have 23 pond owners to feed and look after breeding pairs. We have released over 540 swans bred by these people."

In 2010, Harry says, there were about 1,000 trumpeter swans in Ontario, and the population has increased since then.

The trumpeter swan is the largest swan in the world with a wing span of up to eight feet (2.5 meters). The female swan, also known as a pen, can weigh up to 20 to 25 lbs (nine to 11.3 kg) and the male swan, known as a cob, usually weighs in at 20 to 30 lbs (9 to 13.6 kg). Young swans are called cygnets.

"Swans are migratory birds that live an average of 12 years; however, half of all cygnets that are alive today will be dead next year. As yearlings, they don't have as high a mortality rate as other birds, and as they age, each age class has a lower mortality rate. So, if they can make it to six or seven years of age, they have a good chance of making it to 15. We have had a wild swan live until it was 25 before it died, and a few that are 18 to 19 years old and still breeding."

The average clutch size is 6.1 eggs but they don't all hatch, and some die because of unknown causes. By the time they fly, the brood will be three or less. Smiling, as though still amazed, Harry says, "Once we had a pair hatch and rear 10 eggs, but that is very rare." Years ago, lead poisoning from lead pellets was a major cause of death, but it is not as common now.

Through the window of the room where Harry and I are sitting, we can see one of four ponds on his property, and there are both swans and ducks. Swans need open water year round. Even in the depths of winter it is imperative that they prune and wash their feathers daily to maintain warmth. They are very hardy creatures

and can withstand temperatures of -40C.

Because Harry's ponds are not spring-fed, during the winter he chops the ice daily — no small feat this past winter.

It has always fascinated me how the feet of waterfowl feet can withstand icy water. I learn from Harry that waterfowl have a valve in their ankle to regulate blood flow to their feet, thereby reducing heat loss. Even when their feet are stone cold, there are enough components in their feet that they do not freeze. In the summer, they cool off by holding a wet foot up to the air.

Next to the fence that surrounds Harry's ponds there are grain hoppers full of poultry rationing to feed the swans and ducks. Harry says it works very well, but through observation and sampling mud in his pond, he discovered that swans are very fond of aquatic snails. He sent samples of snails to the University of Guelph for analysis and found that a diet of grass stems and snails actually has a higher amount of protein and calcium than poultry rationing, and as Harry puts it, "Birds will always go for what is best for them."

Harry says it is fine to feed bread to swans, but he cautions people not to feed them old or mouldy bread because swans are very susceptible to lung infections and the mould spores from bread can be deadly.

The main predator of swans is snapping turtles. "I have lost more swans because of turtles than anything else. Every year I lose one to three cygnets." Turtles are called ambush predators because they lie in a suitable place and when a duck or cygnet comes by they attack it and drag it into the pond to drown. The swans attack the turtles by getting on top of them in the water and stamping on them. When a turtle is attacked, it withdraws its legs and head into the overhang of its shell and stays dormant. If the swan leaves and the turtle starts moving, the swan will come back and re-attack it.

The birds in Harry's ponds vary in age and they mate for life. He says they do not form flocks and they have no real social bonds. The only bond that occurs in trumpeter swans is in the brood; the bigger the brood, the higher the standing in the social order. Often cygnets will take on the status of their parents and be aggressive toward older birds.

In the room overlooking the pond, Harry has his desk and a large shelf filled with binders where he records all the activity of tagged swans in Ontario. With help provided through the Ontario Trumpeter Swans restoration group, volunteers tag and band trumpeter swans as well as provide medical care to sick and injured birds.

As our interview ended, I realized how little I had known about swans. But even more, I thought how little I knew about this incredible person who sat across from me.

In a final pitch to get a small taste of who Harry Lumsden is, I asked about the Lieutenant Governor's Ontario Heritage Award for Lifetime Achievement plaque on his wall. He smiled for a moment, and then he looked into my eyes with desperation and said, "Please don't say anything about this stuff, I don't want to give the impression that I am more than I actually am. I just like swans." LSL

*Valerie Pring is a Georgina-based freelance writer, photographer, artist and musician. She enjoys day-tripping around the Lake Simcoe area with her friends. To read about some of her adventures, visit [lakesimcoeliving.com/greatdaysout](http://lakesimcoeliving.com/greatdaysout).*

If you would like to visit Harry Lumsden's ponds to view the birds, please call 905 727 6492 in advance to set up an appointment.

**If you see a tagged trumpeter swan**, please contact Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration by email at [trumpeterswan@live.com](mailto:trumpeterswan@live.com) or on their Facebook group page, Ontario Trumpeter Swans.

You may also contact the Wye Marsh Wildlife Centre at <http://www.wyemarth.com/conservation/swansightings.php>, as the organizations work together.

Include the date, location and/or GPS coordinates, wing tag and number, if seen, and whether a leg band was seen, and the number on that. Reports of sightings, or photos taken with a GPS-enabled phone, help in tracking whether trumpeter swans are spreading out from release sites.