

THE TRUMPETER SWANS OF HEBER SPRINGS, CLEBURNE COUNTY, ARKANSAS

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INTRODUCTION

Three unmarked Trumpeter Swans were first observed in the Heber Springs, Arkansas, area 30 December 1990 – 12th January 1991. Heber Springs is approximately 50 miles north of the City of Little Rock in Cleburne County. The birds were sighted on an oxbow of the Little Red River by very reliable birders of the Arkansas Audubon Society through January 1991. In Winter 1991/1992, three juvenile Trumpeter Swans landed on Magness Lake, a 30-acre private lake about 5 miles east of the City of Heber Springs, on the property of Perry Linder. Mr. Linder believed that the three juveniles were thrown off course by a sudden snowstorm. Mr. Linder, a farmer and real estate agent, lived in town, but came out daily to Magness Lake to feed corn to his flock of about 30 domestic geese. He maintained a herd of cattle on pasture land adjacent to the lake. It is likely that the swans were decoyed into the lake by the domestic geese, the presence of other wild ducks and geese, and the corn feed.

The following winter, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)-banded female Number 207 Trumpeter Swan wintered with its mate on Magness Lake. The Minnesota swan pair returned the next winter with three cygnets. An adult and a cygnet were shot in November 1993, presumably by waterfowl hunters hunting geese. Minnesota female Number 207 continued to return with a mate and cygnets from the current year. Number 207 eventually lost its orange wing tag, but retained its U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tarsus band that allowed for identification. No matter when freeze-up occurred in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, swans typically began arriving at Magness Lake in November, occasionally as early as the 2nd week of November. Mr. Linder fed corn daily to the swans along a flat area, at the edge of the lake. He believed that the birds recognized his truck and trusted him, coming up on shore to take the corn as soon as he arrived. The swans generally leave Heber Springs by 1 March, but in milder winters have left as early as mid to late February. Mr. Linder and visiting birders

frequently sent swan reports and updates to The Trumpeter Swan Society (TTSS).

HABITAT

Our slides show that there are shrubs and trees around a good part of the shoreline of the lake (Figure 1). A paved county road runs on one side where Mr. Linder posted *No Hunting* signs, and signs alerting visitors that there are tame ducks, geese, and swans on the lake. A small gravel parking area along the road bordering the lake allows visitors to pull off to see and photograph the swans. Cattle graze in nearby pasture land. Recently, nearby pastures have been planted in fescue, a cool-season grass, and Bermuda grass, a warm-season grass grown for cattle forage. When Mr. Linder owned the land, he planted winter wheat or rye grass in a field adjacent to the lake and sent TTSS a photo of the swans grazing on winter wheat in the field. Mr. Linder observed that the swans typically flew out during the day with the wild geese to field feed and returned to the lake by late afternoon to roost. The swans would also fly about ¼ mile to the Little Red River, a cold water trout stream. Residents in surrounding towns occasionally reported the swans out feeding in other fields and impoundments.

PUBLICITY

Since the shooting of the swans in 1993, there has been considerable media publicity surrounding the winter presence of the swans. Mr. Linder believed that the growing publicity and viewing popularity helped protect the swans. TTSS helped with providing background information and brochures. The swans made the local television news numerous times. The *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* featured articles on the swans with photos of Magness Lake, the swans, and interviews with Mr. Linder discussing the growing numbers of wintering swans, and the history of Trumpeter Swan restoration in the Midwest. The swans are always listed on the Little Rock Audubon Society's Birders' Hotline, attracting birders from as far away as Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, and Oklahoma. There have been organized

visits by senior citizen and school groups. Mr. Linder stated that it was not unusual to have about 60 people on a Saturday viewing and photographing the swans and that he frequently would give interpretive tours. In sum, the wintering swans at Heber Springs have become a great public attraction and an excellent place for educating the public about the wintering needs of Trumpeter Swans.

MIDWEST NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTIONS

The numbers of swans coming to winter on Magness Lake has grown steadily from the first winter count of three trumpeters. One winter, the Minnesota DNR Number 207 arrived with five cygnets. Another Minnesota – Arkansas connection was made when a rare yellow-legged “leucisctic phase” trumpeter was photographed in Winter 2000/2001 at Heber Springs and what looked to be the same bird showed up in Monticello, Minnesota, on 11 March 2001 where it was also photographed. The bird was very used to eating shelled corn thrown on the shore. Two sibling cygnets, banded in Hubbard County, in northern Minnesota, wintered 2 years in a row at Magness Lake. While most of the swans are unmarked, there have been banded swans from restoration programs in Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Three Rivers Park District (formerly Hennepin Parks), Minnesota, and the Minnesota DNR. In Winter 2004/2005, there were at least 88 swans (Figure 2), as well as one Mute Swan and one Tundra Swan. There were three other Trumpeter Swans reported to be on another nearby impoundment.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Although Perry Linder took a great deal of interest in the wintering Trumpeter Swans, promoted their presence in the community, provided feed, and in general, looked out for their protection, there was no long-term plan for the protection of Magness Lake and its surrounding fields. Over several years, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate conservation easements on 60 acres, including Magness Lake. In conversations with Larry Gillette of TTSS, the AGFC was very aware of the significance of Magness Lake for the Interior Population of Trumpeter swans, and wanted very much to protect the swan wintering habitat, but was limited by State budget restrictions.

Trumpeter Swans are extremely faithful to their breeding and wintering locations, and once they have found a successful route, are not apt to deviate from it. Young Trumpeter Swans learn about stopover sites and suitable wintering locations from their

parents and will bring their own offspring in the future, assuming the experienced birds survive to carry on the tradition.

Mr. Linder sold his Magness Lake property in 2005 and the new landowners, Larry and Pat Eason, have taken a real interest in preserving and improving the habitat for the wintering swans and other wildlife. The Eason family is very aware of the significance of their property and joined The Trumpeter Swan Society in 2005 to learn more about and support the Trumpeter Swans.

Karen Rowe, AGFC’s Nongame Migratory Bird Program Coordinator, has expressed the following concerns about the Trumpeter Swans at Magness Lake:

- The wintering swan flock might be too dependent on the one wintering lake.
- Heber Springs is a growing resort town with significant threat from recreation and second home development.
- The habitat within 5 miles of Magness Lake is currently not typical swan habitat: It is the flood plain of the Little Red River which is important recreational trout stream; there is pasture, but no row crop agriculture.
- Grass Carp in Magness Lake may be depleting aquatic vegetation that could provide more natural food for the wintering swans.

To fulfill its goal of protecting the wintering Trumpeter Swans, AGFC has developed the following objectives:

- Identify other potential ponds and impoundments near Magness Lake.
- Identify willing landowners and work with them to encourage the planting of winter swan forage such as rye grass and winter wheat.
- Work with the new owner of Magness Lake to remove Grass Carp and to plant forage crops, so that the swans will have alternative food resources.

Overall, Trumpeter Swans are doing very well on their summer breeding grounds in the Midwest. However, only a small percent of these northerly breeding birds migrate to spend the winter in southern locations below the 40° N parallel. One of the management objectives of the Mississippi and Central Flyway Management Plan for the Interior Population is to encourage migration to suitable winter habitat. Heber Springs is the largest most

southerly traditional wintering location for the Interior Population of Trumpeter Swans. The local public seems to be very enthusiastic about the swans and the private landowners are very welcoming to their presence for several months each year. Initially being drawn by artificial feed, the swans appear to be gradually exploring the area and making use of other food resources, including field feeding. Heber Springs looks to be a promising Trumpeter Swan

wintering location for years to come, an example for the development of other potential southern wintering locations. TTSS views Magness Lake and its surrounding uplands as critical components in the restoration of Trumpeter Swans to the Interior Population and is excited about working with AGFC and private citizens to further benefit the swans.



Figure 1. Trumpeter Swans feeding at Magness Lake, Heber Springs, Arkansas.

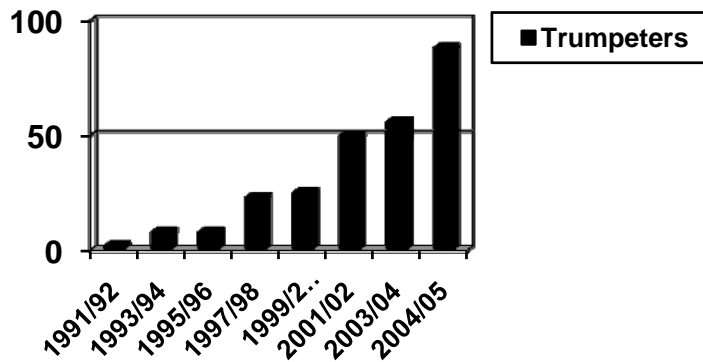


Figure 2. Growth of wintering Trumpeter Swan numbers at Heber Springs, Arkansas 1991 - 2005.