

BLANE KLEMEK COLUMN: Trumpeter swans: Beauty and grace in Minnesota

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Photo courtesy of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

It's been a few years since a pair of trumpeter swans have attempted nesting on Assawa Lake.

For a long time there were no swans on the lake, but sometime in the early 2000s a non-breeding pair showed up and stayed the whole summer. The next summer the pair—I assume the same pair anyway—returned, built a nest and hatched five cygnets. Unfortunately the five cygnets



disappeared one by one until they were all gone, probably victims of predators.

There were a few years of unsuccessful nest attempts since then, but the lake has always attracted swans nonetheless. Recently, as in the past three years, Assawa Lake has attracted fairly large numbers of trumpeters. I counted as many as 23 last summer. And this spring/early summer, the lake has about eight to 10 birds so far. No mated pairs, just a number of non-breeders that spend the entire season loafing, feeding and molting.

Trumpeter swans are doing very well in Minnesota. As abundant as they are today, one should know that the species came very close to becoming extinct throughout their North American range. Very few of the birds existed by the late 1800s because of over hunting. As was the allure

of many other birds' ornate and beautiful feathers, trumpeter swans' feathers provided adornment for ladies fashions and, particularly, the highly fashionable hats that many women wore during the era. Swans were also hunted for food. And, along with widespread habitat loss, by the 1930s, only 69 trumpeters existed in all the lower 48 contiguous United States. None existed in Minnesota, but those lonely 69 birds persisted in southwestern Montana.

In order to keep the population of birds from disappearing forever, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1935. Hunting the birds became unlawful, and, subsequently, the trumpeter swan population slowly began to recover. By the 1960s, Minnesota's Hennepin County Park Reserve District, which had not seen trumpeters in nearly 100 years, much less the state itself, acquired 40 birds from the refuge to establish a breeding flock. Soon afterward Minnesota saw its first nesting trumpeter swans.

By 1982, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Nongame Wildlife Program became instrumental in the expansion of trumpeter swans over the remainder of Minnesota. Throughout the 1980s, the Nongame Program began acquiring eggs from national wildlife refuges, zoos and private propagators. And in the late 1980s, eggs were collected from an Alaskan trumpeter swan population, brought back home to Minnesota, incubated, and the young reared at Carlos Avery State Wildlife Management Area, near Forest Lake.

In 1987, 21 non-breeding adult trumpeter swans were released near Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge in Becker County, followed by other releases in Nicollet, Itasca and St. Louis counties, with additional releases occurring in Becker County. In all, 64 trumpeters were released in Minnesota from 1987-94.

In 1995, Minnesota and Iowa departments of natural resources, along with North Heron Lake Game Producers Association, began a 10-year cooperative effort to restore trumpeters in southwest Minnesota and northern Iowa. The success of the initial collaboration has since spawned a second, 10-year restoration effort. As a result of this cooperative venture, 62 trumpeter swans have been released in southwest Minnesota.

Now, after all these years of dedicated work by natural resource professionals, conservation organizations and citizens, more than 350 swans were released in Minnesota. Today, the statewide trumpeter swan population is estimated at about 17,000 birds, probably more—many of which breed, nest, and rear their young all across the state.

I can only imagine that there was a time in Minnesota's early history, before European settlement, that trumpeter swans were nesting on and using Assawa Lake. That the species is once again loafing on the lake is a wonderful wildlife success story to be sure.

Indeed, the beautiful snow-white trumpeter swan, with their nearly seven-foot long wingspans, are birds that truly represent beauty, grace and all that is wild and wonderful in Minnesota as we get out and enjoy the great outdoors.

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