

HYDRO REPORTER

2020

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Nine cygnets swim with their parents after hatching from their nest along Foote Pond. Photos by Peggy Ridgway

Trumpeter Swans: A Conservation Success



Photo at Alcona Pond by Arno Poerner

Trumpeter Swans: A Conservation Success

MORE THAN a century after native trumpeter swans disappeared from Michigan, hundreds of the majestic birds are thriving at Consumers Energy's hydro-electric reservoirs on the Au Sable River.

For over 25 years, the utility has worked with government wildlife agencies, conservation groups, private citizens and Native Americans to turn what might have been a swan song into a success story.

Conservation in Action

ONCE ABUNDANT in North America, the trumpeter swan decline began in the 1800s when settlers drained and filled wetlands, destroying the bird's habitat. Unregulated hunting for meat, feathers for hats and quill pens, and skin for powder puffs further drove North America's largest waterfowl to the brink of extinction.

In 1916, the United States enacted the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which made it illegal to hunt swans. However, by the early 1930s, there were fewer than 70 trumpeter swans in the lower 48 states and none in Michigan.

In the mid-1980s, Michigan began a successful trumpeter swan reintroduction program. The late Joe Johnson, a Biologist and Manager at Michigan State University's W.K. Kellogg Bird Sanctuary, traveled to Alaska, which has 80 percent of the world's population of trumpeter swans, and brought back trumpeter eggs. After the eggs hatched, the cygnets (pronounced sig-nets; young swans) were raised at the sanctuary until they were 2 years old, and then released at favorable habitat sites.

From 1986 to 1993, Johnson coordinated the state's release program. A year later, Consumers Energy began reestablishment efforts. Gary Dawson, the company's Senior Wildlife Biologist (now retired), identified several hydro reservoirs as potential sites for releasing trumpeters. Representatives of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed.

As the trumpeters prefer tranquil habitats, the reservoirs provide an idyllic setting with few high-powered boats and personal watercraft. Plus, the river wetlands boast numerous abandoned muskrat dens and beaver dams on which the swans prefer to build their nests.

The ponds also hold an abundance of the trumpeters' favorite aquatic plants: various pondweeds, sedges, duckweed, arrowhead, wild rice and bulrushes. The birds feed on plants up to 3-feet below the surface as that's as far as they can reach.

With males weighing up to 30 pounds and having an 8-foot wing span, the reservoirs provide the 100-yard-long runway of open water needed by the birds to take flight.

Consumers Energy partnered with the MDNR and Kellogg Bird Sanctuary to cover the \$25,000 cost to incubate and raise 26 trumpeter swans that were released on the reservoirs between 1997 and 2000. In 2002, the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians released six more trumpeters at Tippy Pond on the Manistee River.

The U.S. Forest Service participated in joint habitat efforts and, with help from the AuSable Valley Audubon, monitored the program and provided public education.



DID YOU KNOW ...

- ↪ Native trumpeter swans are often confused with invasive mute swans brought to America from Europe and Asia in the 1800s.
- ↪ Trumpeter swans have black bills. Mute swans have orange bills with a black knob at the top.
- ↪ Trumpeter swans make a loud, trumpet-like call. Mute swans grunt, snort and hiss.
- ↪ Trumpeter swan cygnets remain gray through their first winter; mute swan cygnets are white or gray.
- ↪ It's illegal to kill swans in Michigan as they're listed as threatened.

Historic Comeback

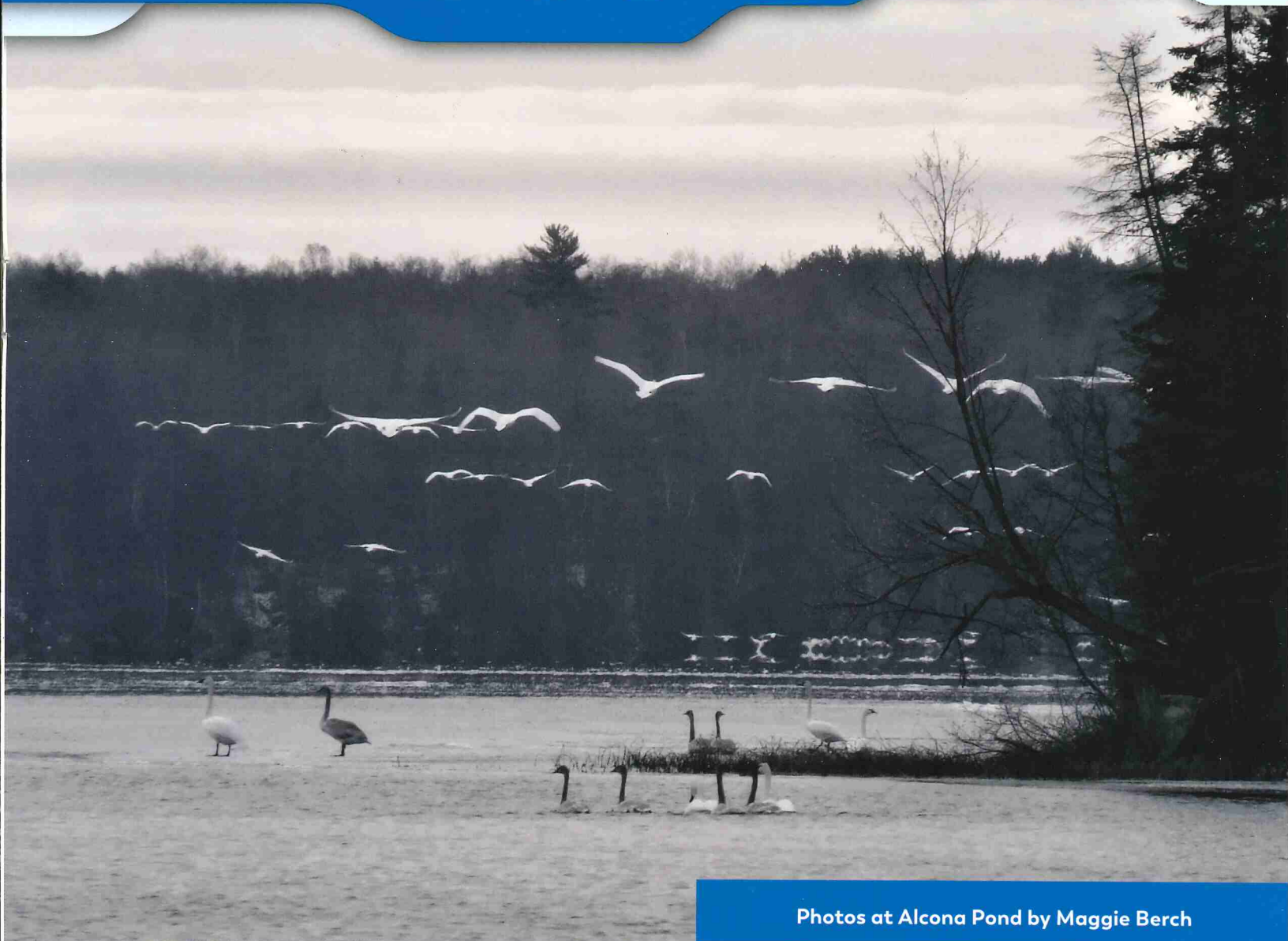
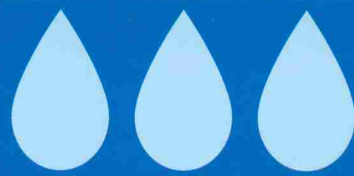
Last fall, the historic restoration of the trumpeters was on full display at Alcona Pond where over 375 adults and 140 cygnets were counted by AuSable Valley Audubon members. During their first winter, cygnets remain with their parents.

“That’s a phenomenal number,” said member Peggy Ridgway. “In the late October 2019 freeze of ponds in the Upper Peninsula, many of those swans moved to the open waters of Alcona Pond. As the birds migrate only as far as open water, they’re attracted to the unfrozen sections of the Au Sable that are created by the overflow of water from the hydroelectric dams.”

During normal winters, 100 to 150 trumpeters winter along the corridor. They supplement aquatic plants with land grasses, waste crops, small invertebrates and snails, such as the banded mystery snail.

Because of this, Audubon recognized the Au Sable River from Alcona Pond to Foote Hydro, including Loud, Five Channels, Cook and Foote ponds, as an Important Bird Area. Plus, Michigan Audubon awarded Consumers Energy its Environmental Business Award for helping reestablish the trumpeters.





Photos at Alcona Pond by Maggie Berch

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Don't feed swans human food. It can contribute to wing deformity that prevents flight. Also, cygnets may learn to beg rather than forage for food. Feeding encourages swans to stay when the water freezes rather than migrate to open water where food is plentiful.

Remove fishing line that can cause swans and other waterfowl to become entangled.

Use lead-free sinkers for fishing and lead-free shot for hunting upland game birds, such as geese and ducks. Swans feed off the water's bottom, mistaking lead sinkers and pellets for stones that aid digestion. Eating lead causes lead poisoning and death.

Stay away from nesting swans. If disturbed by humans, eggs can fail to hatch.