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AND  
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## THE PROBLEM OF VANISHING SPECIES

FRIDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 7, 1936

*Chairman:* DR. T. S. PALMER, Washington, D. C.

*Committee:* JOSEPH S. DIXON, National Parks Service; DR. A. A. ALLEN, Professor of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y.; WM. L. FINLEY, Portland, Oreg.

This session was called to order by the chairman, Dr. T. S. Palmer. In his opening remarks, Dr. Palmer mentioned that there was an exhibit of our vanished species at the National Museum.

### THE PROBLEM OF VANISHING SPECIES—THE TRUMPETER SWAN

(By BEN H. THOMPSON, National Park Service, Washington, D. C.)

I hope that the trumpeter swan will not become one of the vanishing species.

What I have to tell you this morning is not a story of scientific research but is, rather, a brief résumé of the activities to preserve this bird from extinction. I do not know how much to tell, since I believe all of you are familiar with the main facts of the swan conservation program of the last few years. For the benefit of some who may not be familiar with those facts, however, I shall review them briefly.

In 1929, because of the rarity of the trumpeter swan in Yellowstone National Park, it was decided to conduct a survey to determine its status and what conditions were affecting it. The job was a slow one and difficult to perform. In the first place we did not know where the swans nested and there was a large territory to reconnoiter. One could always get an endless variety of promising stories which, when run down, were found to lead nowhere. After several years of such reconnaissance, we felt that we had located most of the trumpeter swans still existent in the Yellowstone region. It soon became apparent that protection of the bird could not be accomplished within the park alone, for approximately half of the remaining birds nested at Red Rock Lakes, about 35 miles west of Yellowstone National Park, in Montana. The two Red Rock Lakes are marshy depressions in the Centennial Valley. It is an ideal breeding ground for the birds because they must have shallow water for feeding, adequate protection afforded by lush, marsh growth—typically, tules in this area—and islands or suitable localities for floating nests. These conditions exist at Red Rock Lakes.

The lakes have been used as a duck-hunting ground for perhaps 40 years. Six or seven duck clubs are located along the lake shore. Each year from one to several swans were killed during the hunting season. This was just sufficient toll to keep the very small population from increasing. Unless measures could be enacted to prevent

this annual slaughter, there was no possibility of preserving the species. An additional element of danger lay in the fact that extensive areas of the marsh land were heavily impregnated with lead. In the summer of 1934, when the lakes were unusually low, these lead-infected areas were exposed, which resulted in a considerable loss of ducks by lead poisoning. Swans are also susceptible to lead poisoning but to our knowledge none died from this cause that year. Perhaps this fortunate result was obtained because the swans prefer to feed in slightly deeper water and because their feeding habits are such that they are not so apt to pick up the lead.

The censuses conducted over several years led us to believe that there were probably from 75 to 100 trumpeter swans still existing in the United States, all of which were within the Yellowstone region. A few pairs still nested at secluded lakes in the vicinity of Jackson Hole, but in one of these lakes fish were planted; fishermen developed a new road and disturbed the nesting pair, so that they failed to hatch any cygnets. That same fall one of the pair was shot. The lake has not been used as a swan nesting ground since. This episode is characteristic of events as we found them throughout the swan region.

In 1934 Mr. J. N. Darling, Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, made a personal investigation of Red Rock Lakes and recommended it as a wild-fowl refuge. The Biological Survey, in cooperation with the National Park Service, has secured options for approximately 25,000 acres to establish the sanctuary. Last fall a Survey warden was placed in charge of the refuge and succeeded in bringing the swans through the hunting season without loss. While duck hunting is still permitted within a single restricted area in the lower of the two lakes, that arrangement appears to be satisfactory. According to reports from the area during the last hunting season, when the shooting begins the swans leave the hunting area and inhabit the upper parts of the lakes. I might say that this hunting arrangement appears to me to be entirely justifiable and was necessary in order to secure the refuge at all. The warden there has done excellent work in developing the local awareness of what we are trying to do and in gaining the cooperation of the local people. It is contemplated by the Survey to stabilize the water levels of the lakes so that the lead-infected areas will be covered with sufficient water at all times. Trumpeter swans do not migrate from this region. The problem is therefore localized.

It was impossible this last summer to take a complete census either in or outside Yellowstone National Park. The records kept indicate that there was a larger cygnet crop this year than at any other time since the problem has been studied. Approximately 46 adult birds were counted this season and 27 cygnets. It should be emphasized that this was not a complete census. There is no reason to believe that there are any fewer trumpeter swans this year than in the past 5 years. To the contrary, it is probable that there has been a slow but definite increase.

I talked with Mr. Hoyes Lloyd about trumpeter swans in British Columbia, and, while it is not the policy of the Canadian Government to give information regarding the location of these swans, he did report that he was satisfied with the protection that they are receiving and that their numbers were apparently constant. It is hoped that

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a complete census of all the swan areas can be taken this summer. It is believed that we can reasonably expect a definite increase from the measures which have been enacted.

## DISCUSSION

In remarking about the above paper, the chairman of the session said that the story of the trumpeter swan is one of the most tragic of all birds of North America. It has the misfortune to breed a little too far south, and its winter range has been encroached upon. In the prairie provinces the bird has been shot on account of its size.

The question was asked: Do the swans live in Yellowstone Park in the wintertime? Mr. Thompson said they flocked back and forth from the Teton country to the Red Rock Lakes. A question regarding mortality before flying age was asked. Mr. Thompson said that a complete census was not kept. You might say the mortality might be as high as 50 percent, but it varies considerably. There have been several summers when one nest has been watched—it would have from four to six each summer. In other summers it might be destroyed by some enemy.

Mr. Borrell asked how far south did they originally nest? Dr. Palmer said he couldn't say exactly—northern Kansas or southern Nebraska.

The question was asked: What are the enemies of the trumpeter swan? Mr. Thompson said man is the real enemy. There is some possibility that coyotes may have taken some toll of the young in some places; however, there has been no definite evidence of this. There is a bare possibility that the great horned owl and otters may be their enemies but we are sure that eagles are not.

The following incident was related when the enemies of the trumpeter swan were being discussed:

One of the gentlemen present said he had spent a period of several days at a critical time at a particular breeding ground where there was a young brood. He said he knew where the danger point was. He said he watched one night and the complete brood was there as late as 8 o'clock and after. He said he heard no commotion—no outcry, and he was within 100 yards of where they were roosting, but at break of day they had gone. He said he searched for evidence and the only clue he could find was that on the bough of a tree where a horned owl had been perching he had found a little of the down from a trumpeter swan—some are pure white and some are gray. He said the pure white ones are more likely to disappear. Someone asked him if there were any rattlers or snakes there and he said none that could be accounted for destroying the swan.

## THE STATUS OF THE SIERRA BIGHORN SHEEP

(By Mr. JOSEPH S. DIXON, National Parks Service, Berkeley, Calif.)

Originally in California we had at least three outstanding big-game mammals: The grizzly bear, the Sierra bighorn sheep, and the tule elk. Our great grizzly bear has gone, having disappeared within the lifetime of one generation. The Sierra bighorn sheep, which is closely related to the Rocky Mountain bighorn, is now in a