

THE Trumpeter Swans

of the Au Sable River



Feeding in tannin-stained water from decaying trees and plants causes the orange-red stains on the heads and necks of these swans.

THE TRUMPETER SWAN — the world's largest waterfowl and, at one time, one of North America's rarest native birds — is thriving along Michigan's Au Sable River.

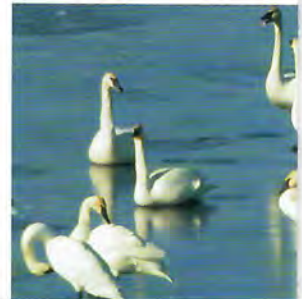
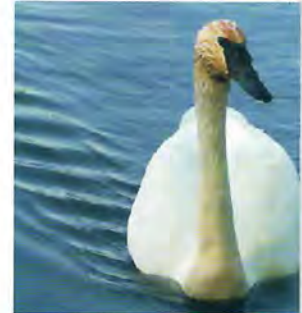
After a successful reintroduction program in the mid-1990s, more than 150 of these magnificent birds make their homes on the ponds of the Au Sable River. Consumers Energy, the Michigan State University Kellogg Bird Sanctuary, Michigan Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Forest Service were partners in the endeavor.

Trumpeter swans are native to North America and were probably abundant in Great Lakes marshes in early settlement days. They were prized for their fine feathers and meat. By the early 1900s, unregulated hunting nearly drove the species to extinction in the lower 48 states and trumpeters had disappeared from Michigan.

Michigan began restoring trumpeter swans using native Alaskan stock raised at the Kellogg sanctuary in the mid-1980s. The successful establishment of a self-sustaining population along the Au Sable is an important outcome of this effort.

Trumpeter swans do not breed before their fourth year and form strong pair bonds. Their nest consists of a large pile of weeds and pond debris that both mates help to construct. Sometimes abandoned muskrat or beaver mounds offer a ready foundation. Often the nest is used year after year with new materials added.

The female lays three to eight eggs in early May. Incubation may last from 32 to 37 days. Within two days after hatching, the young (called cygnets) are on the water. The parents guard the brood carefully as predators, including northern pike, snapping turtles





Young trumpeter swans, called cygnets (sig-nets), swim close to their mother.



and bald eagles, are on the lookout to snatch a cygnet for their next meal.

By mid- to late August, the cygnets take flight for the first time. Families remain together throughout the winter, but separate the following spring as nesting time approaches. The pink bills and legs and gray feathering of the young remain until the spring.

Trumpeters normally migrate only as far south as necessary to find open water during the winter months. Recent findings indicate that local birds remain in the areas along the lower Au Sable River throughout the winter.

TOP:
A male swan patrols the water near the nest.

MIDDLE:
The female sits on the nest for up to 37 days.

BOTTOM:
In 2013, more than 250 swans wintered on the lower Au Sable hydro ponds.

The unfrozen sections of the river are created by the outflow of water from the hydroelectric power plants as it enters backwaters of the downstream dams. Here, abundant food sources are also available. Because of this, the Au Sable River from Alcona Pond to Foote Hydro, including Loud, Five Channels, Cooke and Foote ponds, was recognized as an Important Bird Area by Audubon.

The non-native mute swan, whose orange bill contrasts with the trumpeter's solid black bill, also may be seen on these waters. This species may compete aggressively with the native trumpeter for food and nesting resources.

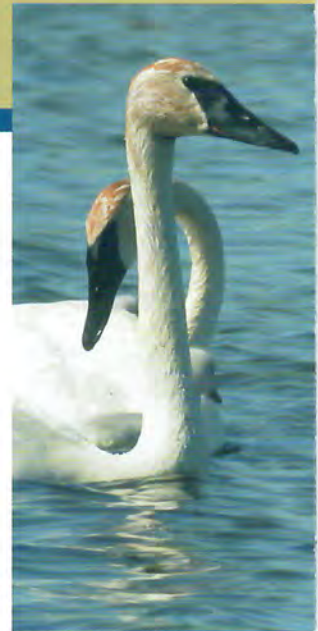
How can you help?

DO NOT FEED THE SWANS. As with all wildlife, supplemental feeding is both undesirable and unwise. The cygnets may learn to beg rather than forage. Feeding also encourages the swans to overstay their summer territory.

Remove all used fishing gear. Swans and other waterfowl can become entangled in abandoned fishing line or even swallow lead sinkers, mistaking them for a food source.



The bill of a trumpeter swan is black, (above) while the bill of a mute swan is partly orange.



Brochure courtesy: Consumers Energy Photos courtesy: AuSable Valley Audubon (formerly Iosco Audubon Society)

