



# TRUMPETER SWANS IN THE STRAWBERRY LAKES AREA OF SOUTHEAST SASKATCHEWAN

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Recent years have seen the appearance of the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) as a summer resident in southeast Saskatchewan at the Strawberry Lakes area approximately 60 km east of Regina. This marks a new instance of the re-establishment of a bird, once thought to be highly threatened, in its former range.

The recent residency of Trumpeter Swans in the Strawberry Lakes area was first reported in 2014 and confirmed by various observers in that and subsequent years. That June, a first identification was made by Bob Luterbach of a single swan, and confirmed with photographs by Trevor Herriot later that month, then showing an adult pair with five young (there were four cygnets by the time of observations later in the summer). An adult pair was seen at that same location in spring of 2015, but only a single swan was seen there through later parts of the summer. For both the 2016 and 2017 seasons, there was an adult pair with five cygnets seen through the breeding season.

In the summer of 2017, a pair

of adult Trumpeter Swans was also seen approximately 2 km away, at another nearby lake with similar habitat. This was confirmed as being a different pair of adult swans by the author in July of that year. No young were observed with this second pair through the season.

This re-appearance of Trumpeter Swans in a new area is part of the ongoing recovery of the species. The Trumpeter Swan, the largest of North America's native waterfowl, and the largest of the world's seven swan species, was formerly widespread in northern North America, certainly on the western half of the continent, and in much of the east (Banko, 1960; Lumsden 1984). The original population was vastly reduced by subsistence harvesting and habitat change, and likely by the massive 19<sup>th</sup> century harvest of swan skins and quills (Houston and Houston, 1997). In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the species was thought to be on the verge of extinction due to the very low numbers known to exist — at one time thought to be fewer than 70 birds in the wild (Mitchell and Eichholz, 2010). This situation improved as previously-unknown flocks were discovered in the 1950s, and through the effect of conservation efforts that involved both habitat

protection and re-introduction in a number of jurisdictions in Canada and the United States.

Systematic monitoring of Trumpeter Swan populations has taken the form of a North American survey that was first conducted in 1968, and has been repeated every five years since 1975. The most recent results for the North American Trumpeter Swan Survey (NATSS) are for 2015. This work yielded an estimate of more than 63,000 Trumpeter Swans for North America. This added to an encouraging population trend that showed continual increases for all surveys from 1968 to 2015, with an estimated annual growth rate of 6.6% per year (Groves, 2017). With these trends, Trumpeter Swans are currently considered 'Not at Risk' under federal government wildlife status designations, since last being assessed in 1996. They are also not considered a 'Species at Risk' under Government of Saskatchewan designations, although they are addressed under Saskatchewan's 'Activity Restriction Guidelines for Sensitive Species'.

So, the broader North American context over the last several decades is of growth in Trumpeter Swan numbers and improved risk status. However, the situation in Saskatchewan is that breeding Trumpeter Swans are still



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relatively unusual and localized. There were several instances in the Cypress Hills area from the 1950s into the 1990s (Burgess, 1997). More recently, there have been populations in the Greenwater Lake and Porcupine Forest areas in east-central Saskatchewan (Beaulieu, 1999). Another recent nesting site has been at Bagwa Lake in Prince Albert National Park. There is no complete up-to-date view of Saskatchewan populations because conservation and monitoring efforts are directed toward species considered to be of greater concern. Also, active surveying for Saskatchewan was not included in the 2015 North America survey described above, due to funding constraints; the most recent Saskatchewan count for that survey was 53 birds in 2005. There may be an updated view for Saskatchewan available through the province's recently-launched breeding bird atlas project; however, preliminary data available at the time of writing did not show any sites beyond those already known.

Over the longer historical horizon, Trumpeter Swans have been known in the general part of Saskatchewan where the new Strawberry Lakes birds have been observed. Burgess (1997) and Callin (1980) provide evidence for the birds being in that part of Saskatchewan in the 1800s and early 1900s. However, it is not known exactly how common they were in the area as nesting birds, and

there is no record as to whether they have previously nested in the specific location in the Strawberry Lakes where they are being seen now. Currently, the nearest other nesting site is probably the Riding Mountain area in Manitoba.

This new instance of nesting Trumpeter Swans will bear further observation to see how well they become established in the area, and to ensure their protection as necessary. As more knowledge is gained of the Strawberry Lakes swans, it is also hoped that information can be gained about their wintering grounds to determine whether their protection and circumstances there are sufficient to allow them to continue to thrive.

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