

Downstream Movement of Moulting Whistling Swans, Thelon River, N.W.T.

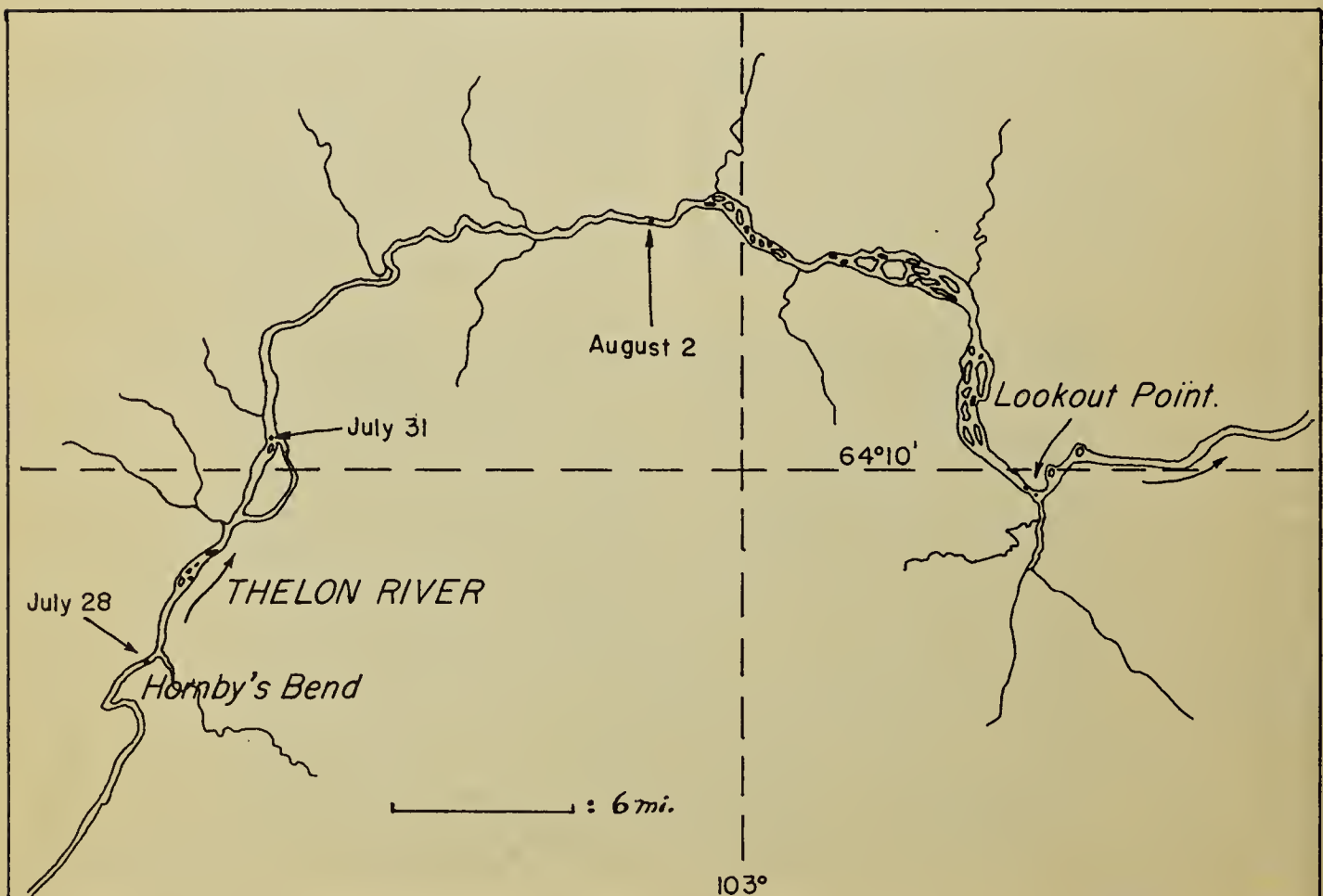
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Whistling Swans are the most impressive of our waterfowl. Some of my most treasured observations are those made during early spring when a company of swans serenely glides to a resting spot on the first run-off water on the river ice in the tundra.

During my summer field work in 1963 in the Thelon Game Sanctuary the opportunity arose to band a number of moulting Whistling Swans (*Olor columbianus*). On a canoe trip on the Thelon River to the Hornby's Bend area, about 75 miles upstream from our camp at Lookout Point (see map), we encountered about 20 swans, including some cygnets. On July 28 and 31, 1963, we were able to band 17 adult swans. We found these swans rather easy to capture. Our method was to chase the moulting birds downwind and then, with the swans only diving when we were very close to them, the man in the bow of the canoe could, with some practice, often secure the bird on the first run by reaching over the gun-whale with one hand. We preferred



Photo by E. Kuyt
Elsie Kuyt holding a 15½ lb. Whistling Swan, July 18, 1963.



the downwind run as the swans could then not get any lift from their ragged wings. As soon after capture as possible, the moulting swans were weighed, sexed, banded, and released. On a few occasions the swans, like moulting geese, swam ashore and attempted to hide in the vegetation along the river bank. Our Labrador retriever was usually master of this situation but once or twice the swans ran so far back from the river through an almost impenetrable willow growth that we did not want to prolong the pursuit.

On July 31 during our return trip to Lookout Point we recaptured swan No. 509-02182, an 11½ lb. female banded on July 28 near Hornby's Bend (just below the site where Hornby and his two companions starved to death in the early part of 1927). Two other birds not previously banded were taken at the same time and we believe that these may have been the birds that escaped into the willow thickets during an earlier encounter. The swans had travelled about 12 miles downstream since July 28. The current in that section of the river is about 3 to 3½ miles per hour (J. W. Tyrrell. 1902. Explor-

atory Survey of Divide between Great Slave Lake and Hudson Bay. Ann. Rept. Dept. Int., Ottawa). On August 2 the same swan was taken again, this time about 25 miles downstream from the July 31 site. Three other banded swans accompanied No. 509-02182. As we had "overnighted" a few miles upstream, the swans must have drifted past our camp during the night.

In the course of making many flights by plane and a few canoe trips I have otherwise never seen swans on the river between the July 31 recovery site and the island complex east of the August 2 site. This section of the river cuts deeply into a sandstone formation and in contrast to most other parts of the river there are no sedge flats, grassy riverbanks, quiet backwaters, or shallow lagoons, habitats preferred by swans.

A possible explanation for the downstream movement of the swans is that we disturbed them from their feeding area near Hornby's Bend and unintentionally drove them past the July 31 site into unsuitable habitat. The flightless swans then swam downstream with the current several miles searching for a more suitable environment.



Lookout Point, Thelon River, N.W.T., June, 1961

Photo by Robert R. Taylor