

A MUTE SWAN FLYBY AT SPRINGER LAKE, MANITOBA

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Late May and early June is the prime time for "Big Days" in southern Manitoba, when some of the keenest birders indulge their obsession by trying to see and hear as many species as possible in one day. A high total depends on a combination of local knowledge, good weather and good luck. Really rare birds are not often encountered, but occasionally a surprise sighting spices up the day. This note documents one such sighting.

On 21 May 1994, our party of four (Dennis Fast, Gordon Grief, Rudolf Koes and I) had started birding at midnight. Daybreak found us heading into Nopiming Provincial Park in the boreal forest of southeastern Manitoba. At about 7:40 a.m., we paused along Provincial Road 314 near Springer Lake (50°32' N 95°28' W) to look for Palm Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow and other boreal songbirds. Suddenly, Rudolf called out that a swan was flying towards us. I followed the direction he was pointing, and sure enough there was a great white bird with outstretched neck. Naturally, we assumed it was a Tundra Swan, but as it came closer we heard the throbbing hum of its wingbeats — a diagnostic feature of Mute Swan and a familiar sound from my boyhood in northeastern England. The swan passed within about 150 metres of us, and we could clearly see its pinkish-orange bill with a black base and bulbous knob. Rudolf had the presence of mind to look for leg bands, and saw none. As the bird continued out of sight, heading northeast, we looked

at each other in amazement. On a previous Big Day, 27 May 1989, the four of us had seen a Mute Swan swimming placidly at Oak Hammock Marsh; the Springer Lake sighting was much more dramatic.⁶

Unusual waterfowl sightings always raise questions about origin: wild bird or escapee?⁵ In this case, the question is a little different. Natural origin in Eurasia is inconceivable, but did this swan originate from one of the feral populations in North America, or had it recently escaped from captivity? A check in 1989 revealed only three locations in Manitoba where Mute Swans were kept: Winnipeg Zoo, plus two private collections; no birds were reported missing at the time.

The remote location, the obvious fitness of the bird, and the scarcity of captive Mute Swans in Manitoba suggest that the Springer Lake swan may have originated in the growing population on the Great Lakes.^{3,4} In Minnesota, Janssen suggests that Mute Swans seen away from Lake Superior are probably escaped or [recently] introduced birds, but that birds on Lake Superior have likely wandered from established feral populations in Michigan and Wisconsin.³ I am not aware of any free-ranging Mute Swans in Manitoba; Belcher has described the status of a small, semi-domestic population in Regina.²

Mute Swans are infrequent but capable fliers. Banding studies in Great



Mute Swan at nest (Weedon, England)

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Britain indicated that most movements are over short distances, but some individuals moved over 100 miles, and one bird banded in Lithuania was recovered on the Solway Firth near the Anglo-Scottish border.¹ Therefore, long-range dispersal is rare, but not out of the question. Two other out-of-the-way Mute Swans in 1994 were reported in *National Audubon Society Field Notes* seasonal reports: at Algonquin Park, Ontario on 2 July and Fort McMurray, Alberta from mid-June to mid-September.

The origins of the Springer Lake bird and other wandering Mute Swans cannot be known with certainty, unless the birds are banded. Nevertheless, it is possible that some Manitoba occurrences are feral birds, as opposed to escapees. It is worth keeping track of this species in the prairie provinces.

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2. Belcher, M. 1980. Birds of Regina (revised edition). Special Publication No. 12, Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina. 152pp.
3. Janssen, R.B. 1987. Birds in Minnesota. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 352pp.
4. Knapton, R.W. 1993. Population status and reproductive biology of the Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*, at Long Point, Lake Erie, Ontario. *Can. Field-Nat.* 107:354-356.
5. Knapton, R.W. 1994. Exotic waterfowl and the problem of "escapes." *Birders Journal* 3:215-217.
6. Koes, R.F. 1991. Additions to the Manitoba bird list (1985-1990). *Blue Jay* 49:202-207.