

Close Encounters of the Trumpeter Swan Kind

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I discuss here eleven detections of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) found in Butte (10 records) and Glenn (1 record) counties between 1982 and 2007. My intent is to show what led to the discovery of the swans, describe lessons learned about swan identification and behavior, and give a brief history of banded birds encountered in two of these instances. Also, locations of the swans, the habitats they were in, and their proximity to and interaction with Tundra Swans (*C. columbianus*) are provided. For more about Trumpeter characteristics mentioned below, see Snowden (2007).

TRUMPETER SWAN ENCOUNTERS

Butte County

16 January 1982 — While I was birdwatching on some rice fields of the M&T Ranch 3 mi. west of Chico, several hundred swans took flight from dry rice stubble and milled about the area for a few minutes before leaving. Among the numerous Tundra Swan calls, I distinctly heard several call notes of two Trumpeter Swans calling in unison, which, in sound and duration, was nearly identical to the Trumpeter Swan calls on the Peterson record of western bird songs (Gunn and Kellogg 1962).

A few hundred Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) were present, but their comparatively high-pitched, quavering calls was distinctly different from the dull, lower pitched Trumpeter call notes. Since I had many years of experience listening to calling cranes, I immediately rejected the possibility of confusing a Trumpeter's call with that of a crane (see discussion in Snowden 2007).

10 February 1989 — While on my way to a meeting, I stopped briefly to read the coded neck band on a swan in a small flock of about 30 swans in a rice field 3 mi. west of Nelson along Agua Frias Road. The band color was red (the code was 120AA in white), and since red neck bands had been put on Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) on Wrangell Island of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, I thought, "It's a communist swan!"

It proved to be a Trumpeter Swan banded in the southern Yukon by the Canadian Fish and Wildlife Service (Len Shandruk, pers. comm.). This series of bands was assigned to the Northwest Territories during the period 1985-1988. As the swan, although it was less than 150 yards away, appeared to be but one of a flock, presumably all Tundras, I failed to look closely at it, as I was hurried. Its neck seemed a bit long for a swan. Had it not been a few yards apart from the Tundras, I might have noticed its larger size.

21 December 1992 — While scanning a flock of about 150 loosely packed swans 1.5 mi. west of Nelson, I overlooked two adult Trumpeters as I was looking for neck bands. About 100 yards from those adults, I instantly recognized two cygnets as not being Tundras because of their all battleship gray shade of plumage; when one extended a wing, a small whitish area in the upper mid-wing was seen. Quite evident were the large heads and beaks of these birds despite their not being close to any Tundras when first seen. One or both of the cygnets were heard calling at low volume a few times (probably not audible at 200 yards).

Both of the cygnets were not near the two adults, which I had yet to pick out, for nearly an hour. At one time they were nearly 200 yards distant from where the adults were finally seen. Eventually the cygnets joined the adults which I had overlooked up to this point. These Trumpeters were in flooded rice stubble and all four were within two hundred yards of me, and at one time, the cygnets were as close as 60 yards.

13 December 1993 — While scanning a flock of swans 1 mi. southeast of Nelson for neck bands, I found two adult Trumpeters Swans wearing neck bands 27 AC and 51AC (yellow bands with a black code). Further scanning of nearby swans turned-up another adult and four cygnet Trumpeters. The adults were banded at Elk Island National Park, east of Edmonton, Alberta (D.J. Nieman pers. comm.). These bands were assigned to Elk Island during the period 1987-1988. When banded, the adults had 6 cygnets with them; the adults and four cygnets were seen, in September 1993, along the Snake River north of Twin Falls, Idaho. The Trumpeters were in flooded rice stubble with a few hundred Tundra Swans, and the flock was not densely packed.

11 January 1995 — Both 27AC and 51AC were found in a large flock of swans 1 mi. east of Nelson along Nelson Road. Looking closely, I saw two other adult plumaged Trumpeters (discerned by head/beak shape and size) within in a few feet of the banded pair. These Trumpeters were in the midst of a dense mass of Tundra Swans, and they would probably not have been discovered were it not for their neck bands because I was primarily searching for banded birds. All of the swans were foraging in dry rice stubble.

21 January 1995 — In a dense mass of several thousand Tundra Swans foraging in flooded rice stubble 0.5 mi. due south of Richvale, I saw two mostly gray Trumpeter cygnets (they had a few, small whitish patches on body and wings). These were instantly recognized as Trumpeters because the uniformity and extent of their battleship gray shade differed from the variable grays of nearby Tundra cygnets, and they were about 25% larger than adjacent swans. A few, low volume call notes were heard over the numerous Tundra calls. Both cygnets stayed together, about 70 yards from

me, as they moved with the flock. I was not able to find adult Trumpeters in the flock, but the flock density was such that they could easily have been missed, particularly since I did not spend but about 30 minutes looking for them. Because Tundra cygnets are frequently well apart from their parents, and it is not unusual to find cygnets in-flight or in a field without adults, I was not concerned that I could not find adult Trumpeters.

5 January 2001 — An adult Trumpeter was seen head-bobbing with two Tundras off to the side of a large swan flock 2 mi. northwest of Nelson, along Durnel Road. The larger body size of the Trumpeter, compared to the Tundras, was readily apparent, and when the three began to extend their necks, the 4 inch or greater length of the Trumpeter's neck clinched the identification. It was during the flight of the three, that, in my experience, I first noticed a potbellied (a shallow vee-shape) breast/belly profile of the Trumpeter compared to the flattish profile of the Tundras. The three swans took flight simultaneously. Also of interest, the Trumpeter gave a few low-volume call notes while in flight (see Snowden [2007] for further discussion of variation in call notes).

23 December 2005 — While scanning a swan flock at the Adams Esquon Ranch, 3 miles southeast of Durham in hope of finding Trumpeters, I heard Trumpeters calling. It took over five minutes to locate them, mostly because the low pitch of the call made it hard to pinpoint. What must have been the same Trumpeters had been heard in the same area on 15 December. Of special interest was that the family of 6-7 Trumpeters (a third adult plumaged Trumpeter was occasionally present) remained in the same area for about 6 weeks, loafing and foraging in flooded rice stubble, and being seen by many other observers (Figure 1). They were usually mixed in with Tundra flocks, but I once found them alone in a rice paddy. On one occasion, they were seen coming into their "usual" rice field with a trailing Tundra Swan: the contrast in the neck length, of the two species in flight, was about that of a Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) trailing Tundra Swans.

28 November 2007 — Three cygnets quickly caught my attention because of their large size and their blotchy white/gray plumage, which had the "look" of what I had come to know as that of Trumpeter cygnets. Since I was looking for banded swans, I soon looked past the Trumpeters and could not refind them when I tried to do so about 3 minutes later. In both instances (see below) of seeing these particular Trumpeter Swan cygnets, they were foraging in flooded rice paddies along with Tundras. This sighting was 3 mi. east-northeast of Richvale along Highway 99.

On 5 December 2007, about 2 mi. north along Highway 99 of the 28 November sighting, I found a family of 2 adult and 4 cygnet Trumpeters. The cygnets were quickly noticed because their plumage was much the same as the plumage of the 28 November birds, and the body sizes of all 6 birds were



Figure 1. A group of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) along Esquon Road, Butte County, on 6 February 2006. *photo by David Hamilton*

noticeably larger than those of Tundra Swans foraging near them. Also, one or more of the Trumpeters called, the call volume being moderately low. About 9 minutes after they were found, the family began head-bobbing, calling, and neck stretching which was soon followed by flight. One or more of the swans called a few times as they flew away. Two of the swans appeared to have a vee-shaped breast/belly profile, but the angle of view rendered that impression uncertain.

16 December 2007 — I heard Trumpeter Swans celebrating Beethoven's birthday in a flooded rice paddy, some distance apart from a few hundred Tundras, their loud call notes coming close together. At the instant that I saw them, the two of them took flight. That I was seeing flying Trumpeters was confirmed by frequent call notes, a vee-shaped potbelly, and necks as long as the bodies. It is possible that they could have been the same adults seen on 5 December with maybe the cygnets in the field less than a mile away where the adults eventually landed, but I could not find Trumpeters in that field when I looked an hour later. This location is along the Midway 1 mi. due south of Richvale.

Glenn County

12 January 2007 — While I was searching for banded swans in a flooded rice paddy 2 mi. west of Bayliss, a cygnet was quickly recognized as a Trumpeter because of its generally battleship gray plumage, with some whitish blotches on the body and wings, which sharply contrasted with the mostly white plumage of all the nearby Tundra cygnets. In addition it was much larger (20-25% in body size) than the any of Tundra Swans which were

next to it. Several hundred swans were in the flock, and I had them all in view for an hour. Though I looked for but did not see any adult Trumpeters, my search for them was not thorough. During that hour, the Trumpeter cygnet barely moved from the spot where I first saw it.

CAUTIONS AND THOUGHTS

Regarding the “instant/quick” recognition of Trumpeter cygnets, that comes only with many years of viewing ten of thousands of Tundra cygnets; in one of the encounters it took me several minutes to realize that I was looking at Trumpeter cygnets. At first, it was the all, or nearly all, battleship gray plumage which stood-out, but with increasing experience of Trumpeter cygnet plumage variation, I found some subtle differences between the “mottled plumage” of Trumpeter cygnets and the highly variable colors and plumage mottling of Tundra cygnets. In some instances, the size difference between the two species was quickly apparent.

In seven of these encounters, Trumpeter Swans were heard calling. In all five of the occurrences involving flying Trumpeters, one or more of the birds called in flight. The Trumpeters at the Esquon Ranch site did not respond to tape-recorded Trumpeter calls, which I played near them for a few minutes.

It is somewhat doubtful that the dates above indicate a trend toward a greater frequency of Trumpeter Swan occurrences since the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to the 1990s, few rice fields were flooded during the winter season, so when swans were found, they tended to be foraging (rather than loafing) in densely packed flocks that were almost always moving; it was difficult to study individual swans in such moving masses. Since 1990, most rice fields are flooded during winter; in flooded fields swan flocks tend to be more dispersed, and their activity level is more leisurely, so it is much easier to view individual swans. However, the frequency of calling Trumpeter Swans encountered since 1990 may suggest that there is a trend of increasing Trumpeter occurrence locally, because I am confident that I would have recognized their calls prior to 1990. It is also possible that the difference between dry rice field versus flooded rice field use (described above) may influence calling rates of non-flying swans.

LITERATURE CITED

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