

No swan song for the trumpeter

I SEE them," the pilot, John Bronson, radios down to the group of seven kayakers. "Pair of trumpeter swans and a cygnet spotted to the north."

The kayakers paddle cautiously through the weedy waters of Cedar Bend, by the St. Croix River in northwestern Wisconsin, and await instructions.

"Mary and Chet, move northwest. Jerry, move east. Sumner, hug the shore."

"Pat, Dave, Joe, take cover on the east side of the peninsula." The pilot circles. "Mary, Chet, flank the cygnet.... Sumner, Jerry, move in on the adults."

Suddenly two large swans take to the air. "We have flyers," the pilot says.

"That's too bad," says Pat Manthey, field coordinator for Wisconsin's trumpeter swan reintroduction program. She's also heading this tagging mission. "I've been trying to get that female for years."

Attention shifts to the baby. This cygnet (SIG-net), or baby swan, cannot fly yet. It was born in early July and won't take to the air for another few weeks. It seems more than willing to cooperate.

Swan takes a kayak ride

Mary and Chet form a V with their kayaks to trap the bird. Chet Anderson calmly reaches into the water and lifts it out. He places it between his knees. The swan rests its head on top of the kayak and watches patiently as its captors paddle ashore.

Once on land, Mary Griesbach, Joe Lysdahl, and Jerry McNally hold the bird as Ms. Manthey places a three-inch-tall yellow collar around its neck. The tag will help biologists identify the bird as it matures, migrates, and mates. Manthey also crimps a numbered metal band around its leg. "The leg band usually lasts longer than the collar," she says.

After taking a blood sample and a swab



COURTESY OF THE WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES/FILE

GET BACK: A trumpeter swan defends her offspring from predators (or, in this case, the photographer). Adult females lay between five and nine eggs each spring. At one day old, the young swans (cygnets) take to the water and can forage for their own food.

to test the health and determine the sex of the bird, it is wrapped in a net and weighed: 22 pounds. A good-size cygnet!

I get to carry the young swan down to the water. I put one arm under its webbed feet and the other under its chest. I wade out until the swan is fully supported by water, and then gently release it. The cygnet ruffles its feathers as it glides away.

"Wow, what a sight," Anderson says.

As this is the last trumpeter to be tagged this season, everyone takes a moment to reflect on the fact that there are baby trumpeters in the wilds of Wisconsin.

Fifteen years ago, trumpeter swans did not exist in this state except in captivity. Only 392 lived in all the lower 48 states.

Trumpeters used to live throughout the United States and Canada. (See map on facing page.) In the 1800s, the birds were hunted for their meat, their feathers (to make quill pens and hat decorations), and their skin (to make powder puffs).

"Everyone just expected them to go extinct," Manthey says. She's an avian ecologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Then, in the mid-1980s, Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin decided to try to reintroduce the birds. In Wisconsin at least, the success has been encouraging. Today, more than 300 trumpeters swim and fly in the wild there.

The story of the swan-egg snatcher

The recovery program started with a few "stolen" eggs from Alaska.

For eight years, Sumner Matteson, coordinator of Wisconsin's trumpeter-swan program, flew to Minto Flats in east-central Alaska in the spring to obtain 50 trumpeter swan eggs.

"I didn't know what to expect when I first started collecting eggs," Mr. Matteson says. "I carried a gray suitcase to put the eggs in and hoped the parents would move

away from the nest when I arrived. Most did." The ones who didn't, he left alone.

Because swans lay up to nine eggs each year, Matteson often took several eggs from a nest, leaving at least two for the parents to hatch.

The eggs were flown to the Milwaukee (Wis.) County Zoo in special crates. While waiting for them to hatch, Matteson serenaded the eggs with taped adult trumpeter swan calls. "By the time they hatched," Matteson says, "they were used to adult vocalizations."

After hatching, the cygnets were raised in one of two ways:

In the decoy-rearing program, the birds were "imprinted" on an artificial life-sized adult swan. "Imprinting is an instinctive reaction of young waterfowl," Manthey says. Hatchlings identify with the first thing they see that's moving. In the

wild, this is the parent birds. "We take advantage of this instinct to teach it to follow the decoy," Manthey says.

It worked. Wherever this decoy led, the cygnets followed. But how do humans move a fake bird without being spotted by the babies?

By masquerading as a muskrat house! Every morning, a crew of assistants dressed in a camouflaged inner tube and chest waders. On top of the tube was a fake muskrat house made of chicken wire and bamboo.

The disguised assistants led the babies to food, shelter, or safety by pulling a line

Continued on next page



LAURIE ANN TOUPIN

CYGNET RING: Pat Manthey (l.), Mary Griesbach, and Chet Anderson place a collar on a young swan's neck so that biologists can identify and track the bird throughout its life.

Distribution of trumpeter swans

Present Historic



KAREN N. SCHNEIDER - STAFF

ONCE HUNTED ALMOST TO EXTINCTION, THE TRUMPETER SWAN HAS MADE AN IMPRESSIVE COMEBACK HERE IN THE PAST 14 YEARS.

Facts about North American swans

- Trumpeter swans, named for their loud, trumpetlike call, are one of two species of swans native to North America. The other native swan, the tundra (formerly called the whistling swan), is white like the trumpeter, but slightly smaller. (The swans you see on TV and in movies are mostly mute swans, brought here from Europe. They're not really mute, but their call is relatively quiet.)

- Adult trumpeters weigh between 21 and 35 pounds. They have wingspans of up to eight feet.

- A male swan is called a 'cob'; a female is a 'pen.' Swans less than one year old are called cygnets.

- Swans are vegetarians. They eat mostly plants that grow underwater, such as pondweed and water milfoil. They may also eat the leaves of some plants that grow above water, such as wild rice, arrowhead, bur reed, and bulrush.

- Adults swans are pure white, while cygnets are gray. The birds may also have a hint of brown on their heads and necks. Such discoloration is the result of a high iron content (ferrous oxide) in the water.

- The swans' broad, flat bills have fine tooth-like serrations along the edges so they can strain out aquatic plants from the water. Their long necks and strong feet allow them to uproot plants in water as deep as four feet.

- Swan pairs mate for life.

- Swans, like many birds, swallow small pebbles to help digest their food. Sometimes the 'pebbles' are really lead pellets from shotgun shells. Eating these toxic lead pellets is the No. 1 cause of death for trumpeters, though lead shot has been banned for more than a decade in this country.

Continued from previous page

attached to the decoy. At night, the cygnets slept in an enclosed area.

Learning 'follow me!' - in swan talk

To ensure that the cygnets learned the necessary trumpeter swan calls, a small speaker was put on the decoy and hooked up to a tape recorder. When trouble arose, the assistants would play the "Follow me!" call. This went on for three months, until the swans could take care of themselves.

In the second group, swans were raised on their own in large pens. These 30-by-15-foot fenced-in areas were on both land and water. This group had no adult swans - fake or real - to show them what to do. They learned by heeding their instincts and interacting with the other baby swans.

At two years of age, the birds were released at various wildlife areas throughout Wisconsin. Researchers hoped the swans would learn to identify this area as their new home. Their wing feathers were clipped so they'd stay in one place awhile.

This also worked. The introduced birds are making a home and raising their young here in Wisconsin. Now their babies have grown up and are having babies, too. Matteson hopes to remove the bird from the endangered species list someday soon.

"When I hear the trumpeters vocalizing," Matteson says, "I'm not just hearing part of the landscape. I am hearing something my ancestors heard 150 years ago. These birds represent our past and our future."

Laurie Ann Toupin

L.A.T.

TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

Helping children learn about God's care

Even pets can hear God

DO YOU HAVE ANY PETS? If you do, or if you have had any in the past, you know that usually you either pick out or are given your pet to love and care for. I remember seeing giveaway pets when I was a kid - small, meowing kittens in a box or squirmy, warm puppies that someone was trying to find homes for. Some would have a sign by the box, "Free to good home." I would want to take one with me, but I knew I couldn't unless I asked my parents.

Now, I live in my own house and don't have to ask my parents' permission, and I still don't have a kitten or puppy. I have chickens - very small chickens with golden brown feathers and shiny black tail feathers. But I didn't go out and buy them. No one gave them to me. They just arrived one day, and the rooster began crowing early every morning.

How do you think they knew that my yard was safe and that I would love them and buy cracked corn to feed them? Somehow they came to a "good home" and stayed. Was it just chicken luck?

I have thought about it, and I don't think chance or luck brought them to my woods and backyard. I think that God helped them, and that God guides even chickens.

When I need to make a decision about what to do, I ask God to help me. Prayers are sometimes lists of things we think God should know about. We might give Him a list of people we want Him to bless, like this: "And God bless Dad and Mom, my sister and brother, my teacher and my goldfish, and, oh, yes, God bless me."

We might give him a list of things we want, and, to be polite, we start with saying "please": "Please, God, I want ..." is how that prayer often begins. But it is always a good idea to start with a thank-you or with gratitude. "Thank you, God, for being a good God."

But what about a *listening* prayer? Listening for God's answer before we even know what the question is or have time to ask Him. Because God loves you and me, and even my chickens, so very much, He will help us even if we don't tell him what we want or need. I think of God only as all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. *All* means

no room for *sometimes*. God is not a sometimes loving, sometimes knowing, and sometimes powerful God. He is an always God. Always good. Always aware of what I need and always ready to guide me. His power is stronger than the suggestion that something bad will happen and that there is nothing you or I can do about it.

Think about it this way. Someone whispers to you, "Psst, you have peanut butter on your face." That is a suggestion. Should you believe it? You look in a mirror and see for yourself that it isn't true. God is like a mirror for what is true and what is false. No amount of whispering suggestions can make the false true.

You can whisper that I have peanut butter on my face for a long time, but if I know it isn't true, I will just laugh and listen to God. He will tell me what is true, just as a mirror tells me that I don't have anything like that on my face.

I have a favorite "don't be worried" Bible passage. Jesus said it during a sermon. He told the people listening not to be worried or anxious about the future

because God would take care of them. He said, "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them" (Matt. 6:26). Fowl is another word for birds, including chickens.

You are just as special to God as the birds, and He will make certain you have whatever you need, whenever you need it. Just listen. Praying is a way of remembering we always have a "good home" and are always cared for.

Somehow my pet chickens came to a good home. Was it just luck?

For inspirational articles, discussions, chats, e-cards and more everyday, go to:

 spirituality.com™
A site inspired by Science and Health