

TRUMPETER SWANS NEST IN ALASKA



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One of the least-known waterfowl in Alaska is the trumpeter swan, a migrant which breeds and nests in potholes as far north as the Ft. Yukon flats.

Alaska's trumpeter swan population of between 1,500 and 2,000 birds centers in the southcentral region, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which in 1957 initiated Alaskan studies.

These swans spend summers mainly in the lower Copper River valley, although the Tanana River valley and the Kenai Peninsula also contain substantial numbers of trumpeter swans.

Some trumpeter swans make the long, northward journey to nest in Alaska each spring from such faraway areas as Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Depending upon winter conditions, other swans may spend the entire year in one comparatively small region in Alaska.

In a three-year study of trumpeter swans, Peter E.K. Shepherd found, from banding returns, that offspring of a pair of swans return to their place of birth to nest and raise their own young. They may use the same nest for several years.

The trumpeter swans construct a unique nest of dredged-up roots from the bottom of shallow lakes. The nests, measuring three to six feet in diameter are most often built out from the lake shore. Seen from the air, a typical trumpeter swan nest appears to look like a "doughnut," with the nest in the center of a circle of water.

The swans scoop up roots with their feet, moving the material with their bills. The female (pen) generally sits on the nest while the male (cob) passes building material to her.

Because of their extensive below-water probings—scooping up nest materials and feeding—trumpeter swans often appear rusty-colored, a staining from the iron in the water and from bottom vegetation.

The female actually begins laying her eggs during nest construction. She lays one every day, until an average total of five eggs is reached, some time in early May.

Trumpeter swans in the southern parts of Alaska are now in the process of nest building. The incubation period for the eggs is about 35 days.

The nesting territories of trumpeter swans are large. Preferring a solitary exist-

ence, a nesting pair will drive out any other swan intruders. The cob stays with his mate for the entire summer, helping her to aggressively defend the nest and cygnets from such predators as bears, otters, wolverines and eagles.

The average life span of trumpeter swans in their wild environment is probably about 20 years. Other swans have been known to live over 50 years in captivity, while some have lived 100 years.

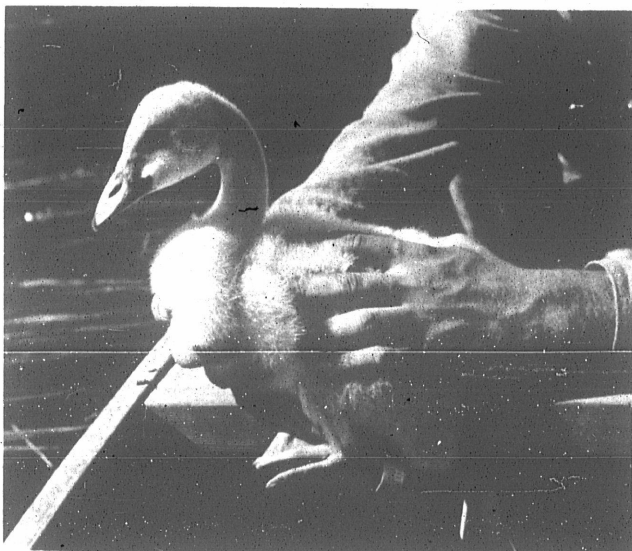
Trumpeter swans are protected by state and federal laws. This majestic, rare waterfowl, which reaches weights of 40 pounds and attains nearly seven-foot wing spreads, does not reproduce rapidly nor will swans venture into new territory readily.

Adult swans may pair at the age of two but seldom breed before the age of three or four. If nesting swans are disturbed they may abandon their nest, not to try again until the following spring.

Only on the North American continent does the trumpeter swan occur in the wild. They were thought nearly extinct until about 10 years ago and since that time have been under anxious observation by bird lovers all over the continent.

TWENTY-FOUR POUNDS OF BIRD—Shown holding this adult trumpeter swan is Lloyd S. Davis of Selawik, Alaska. Captured on the Bremner River, a tributary of the Copper River in southcentral Alaska, swans were dyed purple to assist in tracing their migration. Lloyd Davis worked as a field assistant on the research project.

—Photo by PETE SHEPHERD



THREE WEEKS OLD—By the time this small, white cygnet reaches the age of six weeks, it will weigh 9 or 10 pounds. Born in June, it will not fly until October when it will probably weigh about 18 pounds.

—Photo by PETE SHEPHERD