

NATURALISTS' NOTES

Wintering Swans

Anyone who has driven to Comox in winter cannot miss the fields filled with wintering snow geese and swans. Swans traditionally feed on aquatic plants and insects in the estuary but have come to enjoy the free vegetables and grains found in farmers' fields. A flock of swans can devour a complete hay cutting. To protect the wintering grounds of these birds, the Canadian Wildlife Service compensates farmers for feeding these visitors.

Powell River's lakes aren't as rich in vegetation as those found on Vancouver Island and don't attract as many swans. But we host a respectable population every November to March with peak numbers found in January. They can be found on most of our lakes, including Cranberry, Duck, Inland and Haslem, in family groups of 7-20 birds. Some of those wintering on Cranberry Lake are descended from the population raised at the Cranberry Sanctuary in the 80's. Last year, Clyde Burton recognized a swan he banded in 1983 while he managed the Sanctuary.

Our swans are mainly trumpeters (*Cygnus buccinator*) but the occasional tundra (*Cygnus columbianus*) may be sighted. All adults have white feathers but staining from iron-rich waters may give their feathers a rusty look. Juveniles have various degrees of ashy-gray plumage. Trumpeters are the larger birds. Males, called cobs, average 28 lbs and females, or pens, average 22 lbs. Tundras are about 2/3rds the size of trumpeters. It can be difficult to tell them apart. Trumpeters have wedged-shaped heads and black bills that appear to merge with their eyes. The inside of their bills are red. The head of an adult tundra is similar except for a yellow mark at the base of the bill and a clear separation of the bill from the eye. They can also be distinguished by calls. Trumpeters have a resonant honk while tundras whistle.

A single mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) has also made Powell River its home. This swan is often found in the brackish water at Myrtle Rocks or Lang Creek. Mute swans were introduced from Europe into parks like Beacon Hill and Stanley. They have orange bills with a large black knob at the base. Our mute arrived as an escaped juvenile about five years ago and stays here year round. This swan has no mate and perhaps this is good. Mute swans can be very aggressive in repelling the native trumpeters and tundras. A cob's regal pose when he swims with wings erect on his back may look lovely, but is a stern warning to back off.

Wild swans were thought to be almost extinct in North America by the 1930's. Hunting prohibitions and protection of wetlands has resulted in a significant recovery of our largest waterfowl. On the Pacific coast, we have a unique opportunity to enjoy wild swans right on our doorstep.

This article was written by Ann Clements for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. For more information on local birds readers can contact the Malaspina Naturalists Club at 604.485.6134.