

Bird Beat #78 Swans in Maryland

Written by Jared Parks

We have 3 species of swan in MD. Of the three, 2 are now very rare. The mute swan is a non-native species that can be quite invasive and has been targeted for eradication in the state. This large, non-migratory Eurasian species can be hard on submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) beds uprooting and wiping out large swaths of the important underwater grasses. They also create water quality concerns due to the large amounts of droppings fouling water bodies throughout the year. The eradication program has been a success in Maryland. However, since neighboring states do not have similar programs to control their populations, mute swans still appear in small numbers throughout the state.



Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*): Note the orange bill with prominent black knob. Photo by Bill Hubick via the MD Biodiversity website.



Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*): Note the large, all black bill. Trumpeter swans often sport wing tags that can be reported for tracking purposes. Photo by Jim Stasz via the MD Biodiversity website.

Trumpeter swans are the larger, less common, native cousin of our tundra swan. Though trumpeters can be found wintering in the state, they are far from common as they continue to rebound from being hunted nearly to extinction through the 19th century.

Adult tundra swans are large, all-white birds that often have a brownish to reddish tint to their heads and necks from iron-rich mud in which they often forage. They are highly migratory and are only with us from November through early April (though most are gone by the beginning of March).

Tundra swans are split into western and

eastern populations that rarely intermix. The eastern population winters almost exclusively in the Chesapeake Bay region and the North Carolina coastal bays. Along with many species of heron and egrets, tundra swans have been one of the greatest recovery stories from the 1918 Migratory Bird Act. Since the 1930's, and particularly since 1950's, tundra swans have increased in numbers from east to west. Sadly, the Chesapeake population has been declining for the past few decades and only represents about 20% of the eastern wintering population now. The North Carolina population has been steadily growing and now represents most of the eastern U.S. population.

SAV's are an important part of all swans' diets, though birds are also fond of scavenged grain and winter crops such as wheat. There is a distinct possibility that the die-off and slow recovery of SAV in the Chesapeake is a direct cause of the dwindling population here and a big factor in the continued rise in the NC population. Tundra swans are very site particular in our area and are not evenly distributed across the region. A few great spots to find them include Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge (Dorchester), Eastern Neck Island National Wildlife Refuge (Kent, MD), Turner's Creek Park (Kent, MD), and MD and DE coastal bays near Chincoteague and Assateague Islands. Many of these public reserves were purchased to protect large concentrations of wintering swan and snow geese and have been instrumental in these species' recoveries.



Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*): Note the smaller bill with the yellow spot near the eye. Tundra swans can be found sporting a numbered neck collar used to track individuals. Photo by Matthew Beziat via the MD Biodiversity website.