

Natural South Marysburgh

Three Swans A'Swimming

You have seen them - all those swans out on South Bay, and elsewhere. Likely Mute Swans, but they could have been Tundra Swans or even Trumpeter Swans.

There was a time when Prince Edward County had no swans. Hard to believe.

The Trumpeter Swan had long been extirpated from the region due to hunting; the Mute Swan had not yet found its way into the region; and we were so far removed from the normal migration route of Tundra Swans that seeing one in the area was an unusual event. Today, all that has changed. We can now count the day lost when we don't spot a swan somewhere in County waters.

Perhaps the most obvious is the Mute Swan. Despite their name, they do have a voice, albeit muffled. Mute Swans are not native to this area; they were introduced many years ago as an ornamental swan for parks and other confined areas. A few eventually escaped into the wild and by 1958, were actively breeding, and multiplying, in the Great Lakes. The very first Mute Swan made its debut in our area at Consecon Lake, in 1963. The Great Lakes population has since expanded to an estimated 10,000, doubling every five years or so. In fact, the Prince Edward County and Quinte region in general, probably harbour the largest breeding population of Mute Swans in eastern Ontario. The damage that these large, aggressive, territorial birds cause is well documented. They displace other nesting waterfowl within their large territories and consume large amounts of submerged aquatic vegetation by uprooting twice as much plant material as they actually consume. There is grave concern over the future of other waterfowl species too due to their extremely aggressive nature during the breeding season when territories have been established. When patrolling their appointed space, adult swans will often drown any waterfowl species that dare enter their chosen territory. They often attack canoeists and kayakers out for a paddle and their powerful wings are capable of breaking an arm. At all other times of the year, they are passive birds and the symbol of grace and beauty as they readily take food from the hands of the admiring public.

For many years, the Mute Swan's counterpart, the much smaller Tundra Swan, formerly known as the Whistling Swan,



Tundra Swan in flight. Photo by Cathy Caley

was also a rare occurrence in our area. An Arctic breeder whose home is so far north that it barely touches Ontario, thousands migrate from wintering grounds at Chesapeake Bay, and pass over Lake Erie every March. In recent years, their migration route has expanded, and Tundra Swans are commonly seen in our region too each spring and fall. Twenty years ago, it was also rare for a Tundra Swan to show up anywhere in our region during winter; they always migrated to Chesapeake Bay. Today, large numbers are now wintering here as more open conditions during winter offer shelter while an abundance of Zebra Mussels provide adequate food for their stay.

The Trumpeter Swan is even larger than either the Tundra or Mute Swan and resembles the Tundra Swan so closely that it takes a trained eye to separate the species when viewed from a distance. The larger size and some facial features around the forehead separate the Tundra from the Trumpeter. It has been only in recent years that the Trumpeter Swan has been added to the swan species regularly seen in our area now. Trumpeter Swans once nested across eastern North America in pre-colonial times, but were extirpated by early European settlers before the mid-1800s. By 1900, they were nearly extinct and survived only in remote parts of Alaska, Alberta, and the Greater Yellowstone region. The late Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources employee, Harry Lumsden, initiated a re-introduction program in Ontario in 1982. Birds were released at over 50 sites, including the Wye Marsh in 1982,

and at Prince Edward County in 2006. In Prince Edward County, those releases took place at Big Island (15 birds), and the following week, at Huff's Island (11 birds). Historically, Trumpeter Swans also migrated in winter to Chesapeake Bay, but having lost their migratory instinct over the last 100 years of near absence from our area, Trumpeter Swans now wander around locally seeking any open water free from ice where they can spend the winter. Despite the current concerns over the burgeoning Mute Swan populations, all swan species appear to be getting along amicably, adding a sense of majesty and gracefulness on our local waters. Sometimes in our tampering with Mother Nature, we can produce some unexpected results. A successful re-introduction of a native species, too much of a good thing with a non-native species, and changes in wintering and feeding behaviour of a migratory species.

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