Mute Swans in Wisconsin: the Rise and (Projected) Fall of an Exotic Feral Species

The exotic Mute Swan (Cygnus olor) poses a threat to Wisconsin’s native waterfowl, especially the state-endangered Trumpeter Swan (Cygnus buccinator). The author describes measures underway to control the species.

by Patricia F. Manthey

There are four species of large, white waterfowl that one may encounter in a Wisconsin marsh: the Snow Goose (Chen caerulescens), Trumpeter Swan (Cygnus buccinator), and Tundra Swan (Cygnus columbianus), all of which are native to North America, and the exotic Mute Swan (Cygnus olor).

The Mute Swan originated in Eurasia, where it was valued for its beauty and for its value as food, and was brought to America in the early 1900s to grace estates and ponds (Long 1981) (Figure 1). Some individuals escaped to thrive in the wild, and, like many exotic species, their numbers increased exponentially. Feral Mute Swans were first observed in Wisconsin in 1958 and 1963 (Robbins 1991). By the early 1970s, they had established populations in northwestern and southeastern Wisconsin and have since spread out from there. We have two good indices to the Mute Swan population in the state—Christmas Bird Count data and Mike Mossman’s Mukwonago Study Area surveys. Both of these sources show that the population has increased but now appears to be leveling off.

Why are we concerned about this species? Mute Swans can affect the availability of habitat for native waterfowl, especially the state-endangered Trumpeter Swan. They nest in some of the same wetlands where the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) is trying to establish Trumpeter Swan breeding populations, and they fight with and drive the Trumpeters and other waterfowl away. They also use up nesting habitat and food resources needed by native species, and their foraging can damage beds of aquatic vegetation. Mute Swans can also be aggressive to humans and their pets.

Because of these concerns, WDNR formed a Mute Swan Committee to evaluate the problem and to make recommendations. After determining the
state and federal legal status of the swans and obtaining the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s position on controlling the species, a strategy was designed to control Mute Swans in Wisconsin. Public informational meetings were held throughout the state to inform the public about the plan and to get their input. Response from individuals and conservation organizations overwhelmingly supported control efforts. WDNR Secretary George Meyer informed the Natural Resources Board of the control plans.

WDNR proposed the following control strategies: removal of adults to captivity, egg treatments to prevent hatching, sterilization of adults, humane euthanization of adults, and prevention of further escapes from captivity. Thus far, we have concentrated primarily on treating eggs by injecting them with a diluted solution of household bleach, followed by shaking. A pilot project in 1997 tested this method and found it to be effective. WDNR wildlife management staff around the state have learned the procedure. Adult Mute Swans that directly interfere with Trumpeters have been removed from the wild to captivity. We have shelved the sterilization/vasectomy option as too expensive. We have proposed changes to the game farm laws to ensure that captive Mute Swans remain captive.

It is clear that if we are to reach our goal of eliminating the Wisconsin feral Mute Swan population by 2005, we need to increase our rate of removal of adults from the wild. If appropriate captive placement is not available, they will be humanely euthanized. We have a good start at control. We hope that
by 2005 our aerial swan surveys will show only native Trumpeter Swans.

**LITERATURE CITED**


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**50 Years Ago in The Passenger Pigeon**

The circumstances surrounding Wisconsin’s second record of a Dovekie (*Alle alle*) were described in an interesting article by Dorothy M. Mead in Volume 11, No. 3, 1949 of *The Passenger Pigeon*. The dead bird was found beneath telephone lines along Highway 12 in Monroe County on March 3, 1949 by Joe Rice, an employee of the Wisconsin Conservation Department’s Tomah Ranger Station. (Wisconsin’s first record was shot near Port Washington, Ozaukee County, in 1908.) Fortunately Ms. Mead, who lived in Tomah and wrote a weekly nature column, recognized its significance. The bird was placed in an unused, unheated room, but as Ms. Mead relates, “One member of the family, fearing spoilage, threatened to take the bird out and burn it! But I firmly refused to allow anyone to touch it. I explained that the Dovekie was a rare find and would be properly taken care of as soon as I could see a way.”

On March 6, she wrote Sam Robbins a letter about the bird and received a telegraph on March 9 from John Emlen, who, along with congratulations, asked her to “express it collect” to the Zoology Department, University of Wisconsin. A letter from Emlen on March 21 included this interesting tidbit:

“The stomach of the bird was empty except for one piece of quartz. We are going to ask the geologists if they can give us any idea as to the place of origin of the stone.” A picture of the specimen is included in the article. There are no other Dovekie records from Wisconsin.
Tundra Swans at A&W Ponds, Dodge County by Jack Bartholmai