

HOME COMING

The trumpeter swan's long-awaited return to the Flathead and Blackfoot Valleys

By Anthony Pavkovich

The Montana Waterfowl Foundation headquarters sits at the end of a gravel road in 30 acres of dense forest and marshy wetlands in the Mission Valley, south of Flathead Lake and about 40 miles north of Missoula. Its shaded grounds are dotted with ponds, which sparkle in the sunlight on this still summer morning. The site's peace and tranquility will soon be shattered. A crew of volunteers has recently arrived to wrangle the foundation's six yearling trumpeter swans, allowing biologists to take blood samples and slip colored plastic identification collars around the birds' necks. Later this summer, the swans will be released on the Flathead Indian Reservation to augment a recovering population that had once completely disappeared. ▶▶

TRIBAL TRUMPETERS Left: Two adult trumpeter swans swim in a marsh on the Flathead Indian Reservation south of Flathead Lake. Below: Banded swans in a trailer are ready for release at the reservation, where tribal biologists have been working on restoring the magnificent birds since 1996.

PHOTOS: ALEX BADAIEV



Catching and holding a trumpeter swan is not easy. As North America's largest waterfowl, adult trumpeters weigh 20 to 32 pounds and have a wingspan of nearly seven feet. Nearly that large, these yearling swans make formidable quarry for the volunteers. Honking with alarm, wings flapping and feathers flying, the birds are slowly herded to the corner of a fenced enclosure then embraced in a bear hug or netted by the experienced crew. Once caught, however, each swan turns surprisingly docile and rests its head on the wrangler's shoulder.

Leading this historic reintroduction program is Dale Becker, who has managed the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal (CSKT) Wildlife Management Program for 30 years. Becker and his team of biologists manage species ranging from ducks and pheasants to wolves and grizzly bears on the 1.34 million-acre reservation. Swans are a favorite. "A large part of their appeal is that they are so huge, and they fly with such grace and beauty," says Becker, who also served as president of the national Trumpeter Swan Society from 2005 to 2010.

NEARLY GONE

For thousands of years, trumpeter swans lived and bred across much of western Montana. The birds feature in the Salish, Flat-

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LOSS THEN RECOVERY Before European settlement, trumpeter swans ranged across the northern half of North America. By the 1930s, market hunting and habitat destruction had reduced the population to near extinction in the lower 48 states. Restoration projects since have helped numbers rebound.

head, and Kootenai Tribes' oral histories. In 1806, Lewis and Clark recorded sightings of what were likely trumpeter swans near today's Townsend and Clearwater Junction. Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, founder of St. Mary's Mission, documented breeding trumpeters in 1842 near Flathead Lake.

Yet by the end of the 1800s, the trumpeter swan population had almost disappeared from western Montana and steeply declined across the rest of the United States. Hundreds of thousands were killed for their

skins, meat, and feathers. At the same time, entire landscapes of wetlands were drained and converted to crops and pasture to feed the nation's growing population. By the 1930s, trumpeter swans were all but extinct; only a small population of fewer than 100 birds remained in the Lower 48, hidden from market hunters in the remote Centennial Valley west of Yellowstone National Park. The 1932 discovery led to the establishment of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

In the early 1990s, the CSKT, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks began discussing how to return trumpeter swans to western Montana after the bird's century-long absence. "It was important to the tribes' two elder committees that we replace this important missing piece of the region's biofauna," Becker says.

Swan habitat was abundant throughout much of the reservation. The Tribal Wildlife Management Program had restored critical wetlands and riparian areas damaged by drainage, plowing, and overgrazing. Funding came from a legal settlement over wildlife habitat lost with construction of Kerr Dam (now Séliš Ksanka Q'íispé Dam) in 1938 on the Flathead River southwest of Flathead Lake. To preserve the lands for wildlife and cultural use, the tribes also reacquired more than 11,000 acres of wetland and grassland habitats across the

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LEFT TO RIGHT: ANTHONY PAVKOVICH; DONALD M. JONES; ANTHONY PAVKOVICH; ANTHONY PAVKOVICH; RANGE MAP BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS



RED FOR RESEARCH By fitting high-visibility bands on swans' necks, researchers can track the birds from year to year to see where they winter and nest. Right: John Jarvis, president of the Montana Waterfowl Foundation, cradles a yearling swan during a roundup. The powerful birds, become docile once enveloped in the arms of experienced handlers. Facing page: Dale Becker, manager of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Wildlife Management Program, bands an immature swan before release.



reservation that had been owned by non-tribal members.

In 1996, the CSKT made its first attempts to restore swans to the Flathead Indian Reservation by relocating 19 wild adult trumpeters from southern Oregon. When the birds failed to return to the reservation

after migrating to their wintering grounds, Becker and his crew tried a new approach. In 2002, they released 34 captive-reared, recently hatched swans ("cygnets"), hoping that migrating swans would be more likely to return to where they first learned to fly. "We learned that adult trumpeters rarely

drop out of their migratory paths and colonize a new site," says Becker.

The new method worked. The tribes continued releasing dozens of cygnets annually over the next 18 years. Now more than 200 swans reside in Flathead's abundant wetlands. "We're producing 60 to 70 young

swans each year,” says Becker. “Things seem to be looking good for the long term.”

BLACKFOOT AND MADISON RELEASES

While the Flathead restoration was taking off, the USFWS and FWP were assessing the suitability of restoring swans to the Blackfoot and Madison Valleys.

The Blackfoot holds a staggering 30,000 wetlands ranging from shallow puddles to deep marshes rich in nutritious vegetation. Trumpeter swans require wetlands with clean, clear water where sunlight can penetrate to stimulate aquatic plant growth. The birds eat enormous amounts of water plants. A young swan can put on 12 pounds in the few short months of its first summer to prepare for its fall migration.

Federal and state biologists established a goal of seven nesting pairs for the Blackfoot Valley. In 2005, they released 10 young swans provided by a Wyoming waterfowl conservation group. Over the next decade, they released more than 200 adults and cygnets.

As in the Flathead, initial results were discouraging, says Greg Neudecker, a USFWS biologist who oversees the Blackfoot project. By 2010, not a single swan had returned to the Blackfoot from its wintering grounds. But then a few birds began returning and, more importantly, nesting. Then a



HOPEFUL Though some people have seen adult swans with young in the Madison Valley, no nesting birds have been documented there since releases began several years ago. Biologists hope that, as in the Blackfoot and Flathead Valleys, it's just a matter of time before the big birds return.

few more. The program recently reached its goal of seven nesting pairs. “It just took a while for these long-lived birds to find nesting sites and get settled,” Neudecker says.

Neudecker works in an office near Ovando surrounded by intermountain prairie pot-holes. From his desk with a view of Upsata Lake and the Swan Range, he says the key to

the swan restoration, in a landscape dominated by private property, has been to involve landowners whenever possible. “Trumpeter swans tug at the heartstrings of people in this valley,” he says. “When I have coffee at a local cafe or meet with a local landowner, I hear their stories about swans flying over their land and how incredible that experience was.”

Affinity for the charismatic waterfowl often translates into concern for habitats supporting the birds. “Engaging people in trumpeter swan conservation comes down to getting them engaged in wetlands and the associated landscape,” Neudecker says.

Roughly 150 miles to the southeast of Ovando, biologists have been working since 2014 to restore swans in the Madison Valley near Ennis. Just as the Flathead and Blackfoot restorations struggled to take flight, the Madison’s 29 adult and cygnet releases have yet to result in any documented nests. “What’s hopeful is that people have seen several adults with young, so that implies the birds are nesting in the valley,” says Claire Gower, FWP regional nongame wildlife biologist in Bozeman.

As scientists and resident swan fans look for nests in the Madison, Neudecker keeps his fingers crossed that the Blackfoot population will continue to grow. A few threats remain. Both there and on the Flathead

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STEVEN AKRE; ALEX BADAIEV; ANTHONY PAVKOVICH; ANTHONY PAVKOVICH



READY FOR LAUNCH Biologists carry immature swans for release by volunteers at Jones Lake in the Blackfoot Valley. The birds had been raised in Wyoming by the Wyoming Wetlands Society before delivery to Montana for their inaugural flight. “Swans return to the area where they first learn to fly,” says Greg Neudecker, an Ovando-based biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.



Reservation, swans are dying from collisions with power lines and the occasional tundra swan hunter who shoots the wrong species. Neudecker and Becker have been working with utility companies to hang reflectors from the lines, and with hunters to help them distinguish trumpeters from the nearly identical tundras (trumpeters honk while tundras whistle and hoot). “We’re seeing

progress on both fronts,” Neudecker says. Back at the Montana Waterfowl Foundation swan roundup, volunteers clean up while biologists test and band the final bird. “This will probably be the last reintroduction we do here,” says Becker, as the swan is released and waddles off to join the others in a large enclosure. Though the trumpeter swan is no longer

listed as a federally endangered species, many subpopulations in the northern Rocky Mountains struggle to recover, mainly due to habitat loss. The western Montana restorations, especially on the Flathead Reservation, offer proof that with ample habitat and strong public support, even a species once thought to have disappeared can eventually find its way home. 🦢