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Trumpets on the Backwaters

By Pamela Eyden

Keep your eyes open for trumpeter swans foraging and nesting in backwater sloughs along the Mississippi and smaller rivers. Their numbers are increasing, and they're expanding their range.

Like tundra swans, which migrate through the Upper Mississippi River valley, and mute swans, a non-native species that appears irregularly here, trumpeter swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) are big white waterbirds. Their wingspans can measure eight feet — bigger than any other white bird in the U.S.

Hundreds of thousands of them used to nest in wetlands across the continental U.S. They were slaughtered for their meat, feathers, eggs and skins until, by 1932, all that remained was a small population of 69 birds in the Red Rock Lakes area of southwestern Montana.

Today, thanks to the efforts of state and federal agencies, the Ojibway tribe, Nature Conservancy and other non-

profit groups, they're back foraging in the river bottoms and nesting in interior wetlands and marshes. Minnesota now counts 17,000 and Wisconsin 7,000. Swans nest in Iowa and Illinois, as well, although not as many, yet. They can stay all winter in areas with open water.

"They love rivers and like to forage in shallow areas. Some breed in the open sloughs, but most will head to interior wetlands and large marshes, like the impoundments in Wisconsin that are used for growing cranberries," said avian biologist Sumner Matteson with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Each pair of trumpeter swans needs from five to 550 acres to themselves. Some birds are more tolerant of others, but in general they're a wary, defensive species.

"If a male stands up on its nest, spreads its eight-foot wings and starts to hiss at you, that's an impressive

sight," said Matteson, who has firsthand knowledge.

Trumpeters are starting to nest in smaller patches of open water, such as farm ponds and beaver ponds, but their numbers haven't begun to reach the upper limits. Lead poisoning from eating spent shot is a major cause of death. One or two pellets can kill.

In mid-May, the North American Trumpeter Swan Survey updates its count with aerial surveys. The count is done every five years across the northern part of North America. In cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, biologists will fly transects a quarter-mile wide by 30 miles long to count the swans.

To hear the call of a trumpeter swan and compare it to other swans, visit the Cornell Bird Lab website. www.birdlab.org/

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