

Overlooked Historic Reports of the Trumpeter Swan In North Carolina

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Past and current publications addressing the avifauna of North Carolina (e.g., Pearson et al. 1942, 1959, Potter et al. 1980, and recent various state bird checklists) all overlooked the historical occurrence of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) in our state. While *Birds of North Carolina* (Pearson et al. 1942) is the standard on which all modern treatments of the state's birds have been constructed, there were state and regional bird lists that preceded this work (Atkinson 1887, Smithwick 1897), and, surprisingly, the authors of these lists and accounts also were unaware of or rejected references to the occurrence of this swan in North Carolina. The absence of even a mention of this species in *Birds of North Carolina* (Pearson et al. 1942) is even more difficult to understand in that T. Gilbert Pearson's *Birds of North America* (Pearson 1936) discusses the occurrence of this bird on the Atlantic seaboard and considers the likelihood that some of the former wintering swan flocks on the Atlantic coast were Trumpeter Swans.

This continued omission is difficult to explain in view of the size of the bird and the fact that it was a game species well enough known to be given the common name "trumpeter" by colonial Atlantic coast settlers. The oversight is even stranger given that the earliest mention of these swans was by John Lawson (Lawson 1714), who provided the first natural history observations for Trumpeter Swans. Lawson, Surveyor General of North Carolina, is often cited in reviews of the historical natural history of the state. Furthermore, Lawson's writings were brought to light in a monograph of this swan published by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the 1960s (Banko 1960). Additionally, UNC Press republished Lawson's work in 1967 (Lawson 1709). The continued omission of this swan from the state's ornithological record for 300 years subsequent to these reports is for me difficult to understand. For the last 30 years I have been involved in tracking state bird records and, like others, had overlooked documentation of the swan's occurrence though it was well known to the ornithological community elsewhere.

This omission is embarrassing, as the species' occurrence in North Carolina is also noted by the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list and by Palmer (1976). Both are standard ornithological references. The fourth edition of the Check-list (AOU 1931) and former editions did not mention the occurrence of Trumpeter Swans in the east. However, by the fifth and subsequent editions (AOU 1957), the historical wintering range is described as including "... the Atlantic seaboard [south] to North Carolina". While

Palmer (1976) does not discuss the historic winter range of this swan per se, in a distribution map he clearly shows the southern limits of former wintering to include the northeastern portion of our state (p 61).

John Lawson (1714) was the first to recognize the differences between Trumpeter Swans and Tundra Swans, *C. columbianus*, and the first to positively record the Trumpeter's occurrence in any of the Atlantic coastal states. Referring to North Carolina he states:

Of the swans we have two sorts: the one we call the trumpeters because of a sort of Trompeting Noise they make. These are the largest sort we have; which come in great Flocks in the Winter, and stay, commonly in the fresh Rivers, until February, when the Spring comes on, when they go to the Lakes to breed. A Cygnet, that is a last year's Swan, is accounted a delicate dish, as indeed it is. They are known by their Head and Feathers, which are not so white as Old ones.

This species continued to be mentioned sporadically in North American literature in the following century (Hearne 1795, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804–1806, in Coues 1893). By the early 1800s, during the initial period of documentation of American ornithology by Audubon and others, this swan was seen only rarely in the Atlantic coastal states, but it was still present with some regularity in the Mississippi flyway.

Post-colonial period reports from eastern Canada and other states along the Atlantic coast [New Hampshire (Belknap 1784), Connecticut (Merriam 1877), Massachusetts (Allen 1878), New York (Pearson 1936), Delaware (Pearson 1936), Maryland (Banko 1960), and Virginia (Hornaday 1913, Banko 1960)] support the fact that up through the last half of the 19th century this swan was a regular migrant and winter resident here. Most of these reports are of individual birds, indicating relict survivors of a larger and more widespread Atlantic coastal state wintering population. The former wintering area for this swan in the east was from North Carolina north to wherever ice-free conditions existed. Prior to restoration efforts this swan was restricted to western states and provinces, as its numbers had been greatly diminished by the skin trade of the Hudson Bay Company. Company records from 1824–1828 show Trumpeter Swans once occurred east as far as western Michigan and were dwindling in numbers prior to the early 1800s (MacFarlane 1891, Mair 1908).

Other historically extinct and extirpated species are poorly known, but their presence is documented and restated in publications appearing long after their disappearance from North Carolina, e.g., Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) and Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*). However, even for these species that persisted in North Carolina for 70 to 170 years after the reports of the Trumpeter Swan, there are very few reports and only several documented records (McKinley 1979, Lee 1999). Most attention has been focused on the loss of species known to have

bred in the state (see references cited by Lee 1999). For migrants such as Passenger Pigeons, *Ectopistes migratorius*, which were present throughout the 1800s, 200 years after Lawson's observations, there are only a few published reports from North Carolina.

In view of Lawson's writings it is clear that he was familiar with the distinction between the two species of native swans, and while his report may not meet the criteria of the state's bird records committee, there can be no question that this swan once occurred in North Carolina. The size of the birds and their vocalizations are, after all, their most distinctive features. Just by a process of elimination, the fact that the colonists recognized two native species with different behaviors wintering in the area leaves no doubt as to the identity of the birds. There would have been only two possible species, as the Mute Swan, *C. olor*, was not imported and released in North America until the late 1800s and feral populations did not become established until about 1920. Furthermore, Lawson's statements that these swans wintered on rivers later proved to be correct, as more knowledge of the species was compiled in the centuries that followed. By 1700 the actual boundaries of North Carolina were not defined as they are today, but the North Carolina/Virginia boundary was, as today, set at 36° 30' by the charter of 1665, and this would be the only boundary relevant to the geographic location of Lawson's swan report. Furthermore, considering Lawson's title it is safe to assume he knew this boundary.

Lawson's observations were important ones. At the time they were made (winter of 1700–1701) the frontier in the region extended only through the tidewater and outer coastal plain (Clay et al. 1975). Based on the timing and sequence of the development of political boundaries, it is likely that Lawson's reports were from the rivers of the Albemarle Sound region. His knowledge of migration to inland lakes may have come from Native Americans, as he was quite interested in all aspects of the Indians living in North Carolina. Thus, his brief statement provides a good snapshot of the distribution and behavior of Trumpeter Swans in the Atlantic flyway prior to the spread of Europeans (and gunpowder) through the region. As noted by Banko (1960), his comments were important to our understanding of the historic distribution of this swan and its behavior in the east. These swans were well known to early settlers, despite the fact that the species was not formally described until much later (Richardson 1831), and the mention of "large flocks" on "fresh Rivers" provides information as to their abundance and winter habitats. Both adults and immature birds wintered here. The February departure time shows the species to be a wintering migrant in the region. Additionally, it is important to note that while Lawson knew the Tundra Swan, he was not aware of the migratory behavior or nesting habitat of the species and did not elaborate on them.

It is interesting to see that a number of authors compiling information on state faunas and on species of extinct and extirpated birds in the eastern states also overlooked or dismissed historical records of this swan (Stewart and Robbins 1958, Lee 1984). In Virginia two specimen records of birds

reported to be procured on the coast proved to be in error; they came from Montana (Murray 1952). However, other seemingly valid Virginia reports appear to have been overlooked by Murray (1952). Beverly (1705) mentions a secondhand report, and Beatty and Mulloy (1940) note the swan's occurrence along the lower James River about 1736. Merriam (1877) reports that a hunter familiar with this swan, saw and heard it in Connecticut in the 1860s. The Connecticut bird record committee did not believe that this report was sufficiently corroborated for this swan to be included in the state's list (Zeranski and Baptist 1990). While specific reports may be in question, the collective evidence shows the species migrated to the Atlantic coastal states and wintered in numbers in Delaware and coastal Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina (Banko 1960, Palmer 1976, Mitchell 1994).

In late February 2004 a group of four Trumpeter Swans was seen at Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, NC. One was captured and photographed by the refuge staff on 25 February (Wendy Stenson pers. comm. to Scott Hartley). The record was subsequently accepted as valid by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee (LeGrand et al. 2005). This record is almost certainly a direct result of an ongoing program to restore the Trumpeter Swan back into its historical range. Current restoration projects are resulting in expansion of the species into both its former breeding and wintering ranges (Shea et al. 1991). For example, recent sightings and recoveries of wandering and wintering birds have been documented for Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Mississippi and a number of Midwestern states. One individual from a wild restored flock in Ontario was found in the Potomac River near Washington, DC (see Mitchell 1994 for summary). In view of this restoration, it seemed desirable to put the recent North Carolina record of the Trumpeter Swan into both its recent and historical contexts.

Historic reports as well as recent records of waterfowl of unknown origins are problematic for regional bird record committees. Because of the fact that waterfowl are known to escape from aviculturists, many records of free-ranging birds are suspect (see review of North Carolina records and reports in Lee 2000). The occurrence of wild birds from restoration projects presents issues not fitting current acceptance criteria. In the Trumpeter Swan's case the combination of a previously long-overlooked historical report and a recent record which almost certainly resulted from manipulated populations taxes our ability to evaluate the actual current status of this swan in North Carolina. The fact that this former migration destination and wintering area has been overlooked is understandable. To modern-day bird students this is a western species. Historical records for individual states are sketchy and were obscured by their omission from modern-day literature. In most cases these omissions were simple oversights, but in other cases well-intended people removed them from the record. The trend of not accepting historically significant reports because they fail to meet the modern standards imposed by people currently overseeing state fauna lists is an accepted process but is one that results in the loss of important regional

information. Perhaps too much focus is placed on whether the species is considered “countable” (see LeGrand et al. 2005) instead of on the actual significance of the report.

The practice of using predetermined criteria to evaluate bird reports is sound, though perhaps unfair to historical reports in that documentation standards in the early periods of ornithological literature were quite different from those of today, and many present-day tools, terms, and forms of information for documentation were unavailable. For extinct birds, and for extirpated species such as the Trumpeter Swan, where the discovery of additional historic reports from the east is unlikely, this poses a problem as interesting and important historical reports are cleansed from our regional knowledge. Historical reports such as Lawson’s may again become lost to future generations, as digging into early accounts is time consuming, and most of this type of information is unlikely to find its way into electronic databases. As we can see from the example of this one swan, even when the information is available in relatively recent and well-known publications, it can be overlooked in regional literature for decades and, in some cases, for centuries. In turn this omission could cloud our understanding and appreciation of recent records. Whether or not reports and records of this swan were accepted by various regional state records committees is not the primary point; we simply must consider these historical reports as relevant. Not to do so undermines the very purpose of keeping and reporting observations of significance.

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