

Trumpeter swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) fledge young at The Gardens

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TRUMPETER SWANS, the largest species of North American waterfowl, were thought to have been eradicated from Ontario 200 years ago, mostly due to unsustainable hunting pressure. However, through over a decade of hard work by the Trumpeter Swan Society and the Ontario Restoration Group (including an important partnership with Royal Botanical Gardens in 1998) there is now a population of about 252 birds in Ontario.

The objective of the Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program is to restore the trumpeter swan population to numbers similar to those of pre-settlement times. Here is where we run into a difficulty, since the historic presence of this species in Ontario is the subject of debate (for example, see Whan and Rising 2005 in the resource list). Nevertheless, there is an ambitious captive and wild breeding program across Ontario where cygnets (baby swans) are reared and then released into new areas in hopes of creating new populations.

In Royal Botanical Gardens' nature sanctuaries, we have a large population of swans. Most of the ones seen during the summer are mute swans. Mute swans were introduced from Europe into parks and gardens here, and have since spread all over eastern North America. In many areas they are considered nuisance species — they are very aggressive and compete with native waterfowl for food and breeding territories. In the fall, observant Gardens' visitors have the opportunity to see large migrating flocks of tundra swans. This native species, which looks like a slightly smaller version of the trumpeter swan, breeds in the north and uses our sanctuaries as an important fuelling-up stopover on their migration south. The sight of a large flock of tundra swans whistling as they land in Cootes Paradise Marsh for the evening is a breathtaking event.

Trumpeter swans, The Gardens' third species, are still locally scarce. Currently we have two pairs of trumpeters that seem to be maintaining territories in our nature sanctuaries — one pair that spends time in the western end of Cootes Paradise Nature Sanctuary, and a second that frequents Blackbird Marsh at the mouth of Grindstone Creek in Hendrie Valley Nature Sanctuary. This year, the Blackbird Marsh pair successfully produced three cygnets, marking the first confirmed breeding of this species on our

properties. The cygnets were born in June and will lose their grey feathers and begin to show the white plumage of their parents when they are a year old. The western Cootes pair of trumpeters did not seem to have a nest this year, but spent most of their summer resting on a spit of land at the far end of West Pond. Maybe they, too, will breed successfully next year.



Trumpeter swans. PHOTO: JOHN MILLMAN

The Gardens' staff will continue to monitor the trumpeter swans over the next few years to determine if they are poised to become common members of our wetland wildlife community. We ask that Gardens' visitors refrain from feeding the swans (or any other type of wildlife) — feeding by humans can cause health problems for these birds, brings them into high-traffic areas where they are liable to be injured, and is guaranteed to alter their behaviour. ✨

Resources:

Whan, B. and G. Rising. 2005. Did Trumpeter Swans Ever Breed in Eastern North America? From: <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~insrisg/nature/swans.html>. Consulted September 22 2005.

The Trumpeter Swan Society, the international non-profit organisation dedicated to the protection and reintroduction of this species. <http://www.trumpeterswansociety.org/>

The Wye Marsh Wildlife Centre, the centre of the Ontario reintroduction effort. <http://www.wyemarsh.com/trumpeter.html>