

THE ESSEX COUNTY WHOOPER SWANS: THE MDFW POSITION

By Tom French

(Editor's Note: Tom French is Assistant Director of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and directs the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.)

Once we became convinced that the Massachusetts Whooper Swans were of captive origin and not natural wanderers, the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MDFW) was mandated under its exotic species policy to initiate efforts that would insure that this new species does not become established. Because of the threats to native species and natural communities that have generally resulted from the establishment of new exotic species, Massachusetts has taken steps to prohibit the release of any nonnative species that does not already have an established history here.

Although a permit can be issued by the MDFW to allow the release of exotic species, it has first to be shown that the species is unlikely to have a negative impact on native species or habitats. This is a difficult standard to meet, so no permits have been issued for a new exotic species since this policy was adopted in 1984. An investigation is currently underway to see whether these swans were released unlawfully. It is more likely that these birds escaped from a waterfowl propagator. In Massachusetts, 85 different people are currently permitted to keep and raise both native and exotic ducks, geese, and swans. Of these, three currently are reported to have a total of 11 Whooper Swans, and though none are known for certain to have lost any birds, this does not rule out their captive origin. Although no permitted waterfowl are supposed to be kept out-of-doors without having first been rendered permanently flightless by pinioning, this is very difficult to enforce. Once escaped or released, it is not usually possible to identify the origin of formerly captive waterfowl since none of these birds are required to be banded.

Although the MDFW was aware of the presence of Whooper Swans from the original reports in 1993, a decision was made that no action should be taken until their probable origin was known. The revelation that breeding had occurred in 1996 heightened the urgency to make some determination, but it was not until the fall of that year, when this swan family was on Plum Island, that the MDFW became convinced that these birds were not of wild origin. Once this determination was made, the MDFW worked cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to immediately bait the shore of Stage Island Pool with cracked corn to attract the family for capture by a rocket net. Arrangements were also made to have each bird pinioned and returned to captivity with a waterfowl propagator. Unfortunately, having stayed for over a month, the family left Plum Island just after the decision was made to capture

them. In April 1997 they returned to the island and again could not be captured. One of the young birds was shot by accident when the burgeoning Mute Swan population was being thinned in the spring. The Whooper family visited again on July 21, 1997, but did not cooperate for rocket netting and soon left.

At this point, the MDFW is confident that the establishment of Whooper Swans can be prevented. Since the two bachelors in Rantoul and Clark ponds are wasting away their breeding potential by helping Mute Swan families, the MDFW believes there is no need to interfere with these two birds. Likewise, the Division has never tried to systematically control the existing Mute Swan population in Massachusetts because this species is already firmly established in the Northeast. In an ongoing effort to monitor this population, four surveys have been conducted since 1986. In 1996 a survey of the primary Mute Swan breeding areas of the state documented 917 individuals, including 741 adults and 176 cygnets in 62 broods. The actual number of resident birds is known to be greater since not all of the state where Mute Swans are known to occur was covered. This population is expected to continue to grow and expand.

The MDFW is particularly interested in opportunities to capture these Whoopers so that they can be returned to captivity unharmed. Help in locating the family's breeding pond or other bodies of water where they spend time and could be safely captured would be appreciated. The MDFW would also appreciate any information that may help identify the exact origin of these birds.

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