

**TRUMPETER SWAN IN BOLIVAR COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI**

Nona Herbert

and

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On 10 January 1990 at about 2:00 p.m., Nona and J.C. Herbert saw two quite large white birds in a flooded field about one mile to the north of Mississippi highway 450 west of Choctaw, Bolivar County. They turned north on a gravel road 4 miles west of Choctaw to approach the birds more closely, although they were still about 0.5 mile from them and the birds were partly hidden from view by dead brush. At that time the Herberts identified the birds as Tundra Swans (*Cygnus columbianus*), which they had seen in the Mississippi Delta within the previous month.

One swan was noticeably larger than the other and it was supposed that the difference might be between male and female birds. Farther north and east along the same road, the Herberts found an extraordinary concentration of thousands of ducks and all three species of geese normally found in Mississippi. We believe that the swans arrived along with other waterfowl in conjunction with passage of a front on the night of 9-10 January. On 11 January two swans were present at the same site, and still at great distance from roads. The numbers of geese had fallen to about 1000, while most of the ducks had moved to a catfish farm about a mile west.

On the afternoon of 13 January, Mrs. Herbert went to the Lake Chicot State Park in Arkansas, where she told wildlife interpreter Don Simons about the swans. He went to the Bolivar County site on 14 January and discovered that the birds included one Tundra Swan and one Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*), rather than two Tundra Swans. At that time the birds were only about 110 yards from the gravel road, allowing good observation of the birds with 8.5 X 44 binoculars and a 15-60X spotting scope. The larger swan was longer-necked and had a minimally-sloped profile of bill and forehead, and a pattern of black facial skin reaching to the eye -- characteristics of the Trumpeter Swan. Simons also noted a reddish edge to the mandible and a kink in the neck not shown by the smaller Tundra Swan. The latter

bird showed a yellow spot in front of its eye, held its neck straighter, had a more concave bill shape, and did not have so much dark facial skin reaching the eye.

On 15 January the Herberts also found the swans near the road and were able to repeat Simon's observations and concur in his identification of the birds. W. Marvin Davis arrived at mid-afternoon, agreed with the identification, and took documenting photographs.

Over the next several days birders from several areas of Mississippi joined in the viewing. Because of the coverage by newspapers in Cleveland and Jackson, many persons from Bolivar County and the Delta, but also from the four surrounding states, came to see this "odd couple" of the swan world over the next several weeks. During early February, Betty Van Meek took the photos of the pair shown in Figures 1 and 2. The last sighting of the swans was at 3:30 p.m. on 10 February 1990. They had departed before 8:30 a.m. on 11 February.

The behavior of the birds seems worthy of note. They ate almost constantly and voraciously, seemingly feeding on sprouted soybean seeds and grasses in the flooded fields. Commonly they stayed in fields feeding, except for times when they flew to an area about one mile to the northeast. There they swam, bathed, and rested daily in a field with geese and ducks. On at least some occasions they left at dusk to spend the night on a new pond at the catfish farm one mile to the west. Both swans were heard by Herbert to call loudly at various times, as well as make low murmuring sounds when feeding together. The loud vocalizations of the Trumpeter were indeed a "trumpet" sound; for the Tundra they were a more "yodelling call."

A pair consisting of an adult Trumpeter Swan and an immature Tundra Swan spent June of 1989 together on Lake Lunby near Grand Forks, North Dakota (Berkey 1989). It seems possible that this could have been the same duo wintering together in Mississippi about seven months later. Berkey (1989) speculated that the five Trumpeter Swans found in the 1989 summer at three locations in North Dakota may have originated from flocks established in recent years at the LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge, South Dakota, and in Hennepin County, Minnesota.

Figures 1 and 2. The Trumpeter (larger) and Tundra (smaller) swans observed in Bolivar County, Mississippi, during January and February 1990.



James and Neal (1986) indicate that the Trumpeter Swan was extirpated from Arkansas, with no records for at least 70 years, but that it "formerly wintered well to the south of Arkansas including the Gulf coast and the Mississippi valley." Audubon is said to have shot one near the mouth of the Arkansas River, which is in Desha County, directly across the Mississippi River from Bolivar County. Other localities were in Crittenden, St. Francis, and Poinsett counties, all of which are in the Delta area of Arkansas just north of Bolivar County, Mississippi.

During January 1991, three immature Trumpeter Swans spent time at a farm pond near Heber Springs, Cleburne County, Arkansas (W.M. Davis, personal communication). Thus it seems possible that the species may again occur in Mississippi and observers need to exercise care in future identification of swans in the state.

#### Literature Cited

- Berkey, G. 1989. The nesting season: northern Great Plains region. *Am. Birds* 43:1332-1334.
- James, D.A., and J.C. Neal. 1986. *Arkansas birds: their distribution and abundance*. Arkansas University Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas.