

The Return of the Trumpeter Swans and How We Can Keep Them Here

by Sheniz Janmohamed

*Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air -
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank,
a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?*

From "The Swan," by Mary Oliver

If you've found yourself walking along the trail at Swan Lake Park, you might have seen one, lingering at the edges of the shoreline, or basking in the light of an afternoon sun. A trumpeter swan stands elegant as it preens its 30,000 plus downy white feathers, two layers thick to keep it warm even on the coldest winter evenings. And unlike its mute cousin, it has a sleek black beak, and towers over its fellow black-beaked cousin, the tundra.

On October 1, Friends of Swan Lake Park celebrated its fourth year anniversary, complete with birthday cake and an informative presentation on the trumpeter swan, courtesy of Donna Lewis and Kim Stevenson from Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration.

Speaking to a full house, Donna Lewis, Swan Keeper at Adena Springs North (Aurora), spoke passionately about the behaviour, qualities and habitat of the trumpeter swan as well as the decades long effort to increase the presence of trumpeter swans in Ontario.

The champion of trumpeter swan restoration was the late MNR biologist, Harry G. Lumsden, who worked tirelessly to reintroduce native trumpeter swans to Ontario's wild habitats.

The trumpeter swan has a difficult past. Throughout the 19th century, trumpeter swans were hunted almost to extinction for their skin, meat and feathers. Swan feathers were highly sought after, as they made the best quills. Even the famous nature artist, Audubon, preferred to use swan quills. By the 1930s, it was thought that the trumpeter swans were endangered, and hunting ceased.

In 1982, Harry Lumsden had a vision to reintroduce the trumpeter swan to its natural habitat. He launched a captive breeding program, which has since released 584 captive-reared swans in 54 locations around Ontario, and thankfully the trumpeter swans still had their instinct of migration.

As of 2020, the trumpeter swan population has ballooned to an estimated 2800 to 4000. Sightings have grown from 12 in 1982 to 35,600 in 2021! The tireless efforts of volunteers and visionaries have revitalized the trumpeter swan population in Ontario and across North America.

After Lewis spoke, Stevenson enthusiastically jumped in, sharing stories about the complex and often amusing pair bonding and "soap opera-like" drama of trumpeter swans here at Swan Lake to the ones we have yet to meet.

Both speakers shared cautionary tales of protective trumpeter swan parents, encouraging dog owners to keep their dogs out of the water, lest they be lured out to deep water and drowned by protective swan dads.

So what do we do here in Swan Lake, to ensure the presence and safety of trumpeter swans?

Lewis encouraged everyone who benefits from the beauty and presence of Swan Lake Park to do their part—big or small—whether it's picking up garbage along the trail, restoring the shoreline, improving the water quality or choosing to plant native plants. One of the biggest threats to the trumpeter swan is lead poisoning from ingesting lead fishing sinkers or spent lead shot, so responsible fishing will go a long way in protecting our feathered friends.

Now that the trumpeter swans have returned, let's make sure they feel welcome. □



[Photo courtesy of Don Fowler]