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LOUIE BOUMA DIDN'T KNOW IT AT THE TIME, but his effort to save four orphaned trumpeter swan eggs would launch a waterfowl conservation movement. The owner of a post and pole yard near Lincoln had watched a pair of the white, long-necked birds set up a nest at his pond in spring 2003. He was used to seeing lots of ducks and geese, but no nesting swans had been documented in the Blackfoot Valley since the late 19th century.

Bouma's son found the female swan dead in the driveway early one morning in late May. The power was out at the post and pole yard and the office clock had stopped at 1 a.m., leaving little doubt that the swan had hit a power line.

Undeterred by the loss, Bouma retrieved four eggs from the nest and kept them warm. Within hours, local volunteers and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists transported the eggs to the nonprofit Montana Waterfowl Foundation near Ronan. There, cared for by a pair of surrogate trumpeter swans owned by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), three eggs hatched.

Tom Hinz, FWP Montana Wetlands Legacy Partnership coordinator, says that after the fledglings grew into juveniles, they were returned to Bouma's pond. That's when he and other wildlife biologists began thinking about the trumpeter's place in the Blackfoot Valley. "The male spent months with them, and eventually they flew out of there and into history," Hinz says. "That really inspired us and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) to work with people like Louie and other folks in the Blackfoot Valley to bring these birds back."

KILLED FOR FASHION

Though no estimates exist of historical trumpeter swan numbers in the Blackfoot Valley, Meriwether Lewis wrote of the big white birds while passing through the area in 1806. Early Montana settlers made note of the swans, which, weighing over 20 pounds and with a wingspan of nearly 7 feet, are North America's largest waterfowl. Greg Neudecker, a biologist with the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, says these and other historical accounts indicate the wetlands-rich valley held a healthy population that returned each summer to nest. But that was before the white-feathered hat became a fashion staple of Europe.

Beginning in the late 1800s, trumpeter swan populations declined across North America and were eliminated from the Blackfoot Valley. Settlers shot the big birds for food, but it was the commercial harvest of swans to supply the millinery trade in Europe that depleted the population to near extinction. As they did with egrets and herons killed in the South, U.S. exporters bundled tens of thousands of dried swan hides for shipment across the Atlantic to adorn hats for fashionable ladies. Slow to take flight, trumpeter swans were particularly vulnerable to market hunters. Not until 1916 did international law stop trade in swans and other birds among countries, ending the widespread slaughter. Unfortunately, the regulations came too late to save most trumpeter swan flocks that once graced wetlands like those in Montana's Blackfoot Valley.

Protection from commercial harvest helped the Rocky Mountain trumpeter swan population, which spans both U.S. and Canadian nesting grounds, to slowly

Over the past six years, 140 trumpeter swans have been reared and released in the Blackfoot Valley. Now the majestic birds face power lines, illegal shooting, and other dangers as they try to return home.

AWAITING THE TRUMPETER'S RETURN

BY NICK GEVOCK



SAD SETBACK A banded trumpeter swan lies dead in a pond after flying into a power line. Only a few of the 140 swans released in the Blackfoot Valley in recent years have returned. "Each death is hugely significant, because it can set the restoration back by several years," says FWP biologist Tom Hinz.

increase. The population today is nearly 5,000 birds. Roughly 80 to 90 percent are Canadian swans that nest north of the international border. Many pass through Montana during spring and fall migrations, but only a few stay here to nest. (Twenty-one pairs nested in Montana last year—including five in the Flathead Valley as a result of the CSKT's successful reestablishment of a flock there, eleven in the Centennial Valley around Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, and the rest at scattered sites.) Other than the pair Bouma found at his pond in 2003, no trumpeters have nested in the Blackfoot Valley.

In 2004, state and federal biologists devised a plan to restore trumpeter swans to the Blackfoot. The first step was for biologists to inventory the valley's abundant wetland habitat. They documented 30,000 wetlands—ranging from shallow puddles that warm early in spring to deeper marshes rich in nutritious vegetation. "That rivals the wetland density you find in the prairie pot-hole landscape of the Dakotas, except it's surrounded by mountains," Neudecker says.

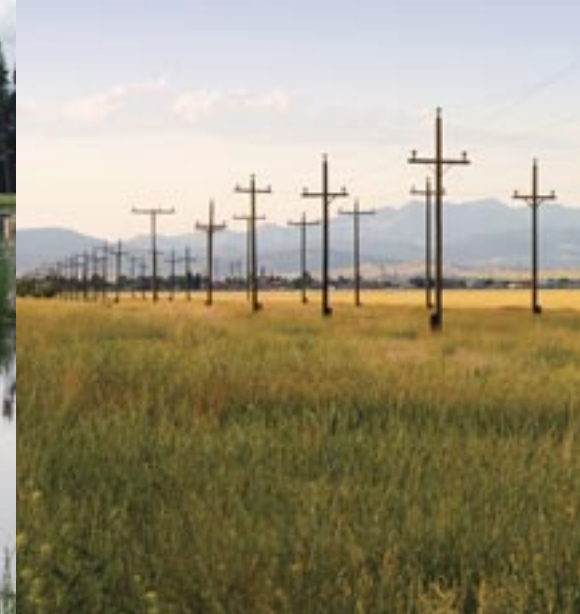
The most important habitats for trumpeter swans, says Hinz, are basins of clean water with abundant submergent vegetation and nesting security. He calls swans "aquatic horses" because the birds graze all day to sustain themselves. A young swan puts on 12 pounds in just a few summer months while developing from a hatchling to a bird that flies south for the winter.

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LEFT TO RIGHT: KRISTI DUBOIS; BOB MARTINAK; BOB MARTINAK; ISTOCKPHOTO

SWAN SHIPMENT Left: Juvenile trumpeters reared in Wyoming but still unable to fly are trucked to a wetland complex in the Blackfoot Valley. Right: Volunteers and state and federal officials release swans during summer 2009. FWP biologist Tom Hinz says the swan restoration effort derives much of its support from bird lovers who help pay to rear each bird from an egg, mark it with a leg band or neck collar (some with satellite transmitters, below), then turn the swans loose into the valley's wetlands.



FLYING THE GAUNTLET Biologists say too many released swans returning to the Blackfoot are colliding with fences and power lines (above). Or they are shot—purposely by vandals or accidentally by hunters mistaking them for tundra swans.

"Water quality is critical because sunlight needs to get through to reach the plants," Hinz says. "A muddy, murky pond just won't work for swans."

The habitat review also showed the valley contains many ponds with islands or muskrat lodges where swans can nest secure from foxes and other roving predators. The birds also need to stay clear of humans. "In other states and in Montana there have been instances where people went up to examine a nest—they didn't really bother the birds; they just looked—and the pair abandoned the pond and never nested there again," Hinz says. "Trumpeter swans aren't like Canada geese on the golf course. They are

very wild creatures and usually don't tolerate a lot of human activity."

After the wetland inventory, biologists established a goal of seven nesting pairs for the Blackfoot. In 2005, they began releasing birds provided by the Wyoming Wetlands Society in Jackson, starting with 10 individual birds. "The idea is that a swan is likely to return to where it first took flight," says Hinz. "But even more important, after it returns the following spring it then stays at that site and molts [drops old feathers and grows new ones]. That takes several months, and as it hangs around a wetland waiting until it can fly again, the bird develops an affinity for that place. Then, hopefully, it

returns in later years and nests there." Unfortunately, things haven't worked out that way in the Blackfoot—yet.

RETURNING BUT NOT NESTING

So far, says Hinz, none of the 140 swans released into the Blackfoot Valley over the past six years have returned and nested. A few pairs containing either one or two previously released birds have come back, but none have laid eggs. "On the one hand that's discouraging," says Hinz. "On the other, the fact that some are coming back is a hopeful sign. That's how restorations like this have succeeded in other parts of the West."

The whereabouts of most of the released birds is a mystery. Fitted with highly visible identification bands around their necks, some trumpeters have been spotted in parts of western Montana, as well as in Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, and southern Alberta. It's likely, however, that most of the released birds have died. "Trumpeter swans often fly a lot lower to the ground than other waterfowl, and they don't seem to see obstructions like fences and power lines," Hinz says. Others die from parasites and predators, and a few are shot every year by hunters mistaking them for similar looking (and far more abundant) tundra swans, as well as by miscreants who shoot them for no good reason. Despite the set-

backs, however, biologists aren't discouraged.

Hinz says power companies have been willing to hang reflectors from power lines in areas used by swans. Though some swans still fly into the wires, the fluttering reflectors have reduced mortalities. He and other biologists are also working with property owners to put reflectors on fences and other obstructions that could pose a hazard to flying swans.

Because tundra and trumpeter swans are virtually indistinguishable in flight, waterfowl

are not federally threatened or endangered. It's legal to hunt them in the western half of Montana (the Pacific Flyway), though not elsewhere in the state.

Neudecker is not surprised that no swans have nested in the Blackfoot Valley so far. It takes trumpeters three years to reach sexual maturity, which means the release program is only now reaching the point where some of the first released birds could come back and successfully rear young.

That will be the turning point, Hinz says. Swans mate for life—unless one of a pair dies—and the young are prone to return to their nesting grounds year after year. If multiple nesting pairs produce young, there's a good chance trumpeters will reestablish in the Blackfoot. "That's why we're stepping up public awareness efforts about protecting these swans," he says. "The future of the Blackfoot flock rests with this handful of migrating adults. The loss of just a few breeding swans from power line collisions could delay the restoration by years."

Neudecker says he and other biologists have always known the restoration wouldn't occur overnight, but they're confident it will occur. "Slowly but surely, trumpeter swans are coming back to the Blackfoot," he says. "You want it to happen immediately, but it's really a long-term process." 🐾

“The future of the Blackfoot flock rests with this handful of migrating adults.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- If you see a swan collide or nearly collide with a power line, fence, tower, or other obstruction, contact Tom Hinz at (406) 994-7889, thinzm@mt.gov or Greg Neudecker at (406) 793-7400, greg_neudecker@fws.gov.
- If you find a dead or injured swan, contact Hinz or Neudecker. Birds with damaged wings or other injuries often can be saved if promptly cared for by wildlife professionals.
- Report sightings of any swan with a neck collar. The red plastic collars on swans released into the Blackfoot Valley have an identification code easily read through binoculars or a spotting scope.
- If you hunt, consider not shooting any swan with a neck collar. It might be one of the few trumpeters trying to return to the Blackfoot Valley to nest.
- Hunters and others can learn to distinguish trumpeter swans from tundra swans by their different calls. Hear the difference at <http://trumpeterswansociety.org/swan-voice.html>.
- Follow Blackfoot swans on the Internet at <http://blackfootchallenge.org/SwanProject/>.



BOB MARTINAK