

## **The Status and Occurrence of Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin and Jamie Fenneman.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) breeds across northern Eurasia from Iceland and Scandinavia east through boreal and temperate regions of Russia and northern Asia to Anadyr Bay, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and Sakhalin Island (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). It has occasionally been recorded breeding on the outer Aleutian Islands of Alaska, such as on Attu Island in 1996 and 1998 (Sykes and Sonneborn 1998, West 2008). It winters throughout much of Europe and southwest Asia (Scandinavia south to France, Greece, Turkey, and Iran; as well as in eastern Asia in Japan, Korean Peninsula, and China (Brazil 2009). Small numbers regularly migrate and winter throughout the western and central Aleutian Islands of Alaska (West 2008). The Whooper Swan is a widespread and abundant breeding species across northern Eurasia, and there are no indications that the population is declining (IUCN 2014). Given its regularity in Alaska and its large global population, occasional occurrences of this highly migratory species along the west coast of North America are not unexpected. The Whooper Swan is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with only a couple of accepted records (Toochin *et al.* 2013a, see Table 1). Outside of British Columbia, the Whooper Swan has a minor pattern of occurrence during the fall and winter in western North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is occasionally seen in northern and central California (Nov-Mar), where a total of eight records have been accepted by the California Bird Records Committee up to 2011 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2011). There are three accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (Nov-Jan) (OFO 2012) and a single December record from Snohomish County, Washington that is accepted by the Washington Bird Records Committee (WBRC 2011). Elsewhere, this species has been accepted as a genuine vagrant in southern Idaho (IBRC 2011), at Yellowstone Park in Wyoming (McEneaney 2004), and in the southern Yukon (Cecile 2003). Whooper Swans are commonly kept in captivity and escapees are always possible which cloud many records away from the western and central Aleutians in Alaska where they naturally occur in North America (West 2008).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The Whooper Swan is a graceful looking species that should be searched for carefully amongst migrating flocks of Tundra and Trumpeter Swans.

The adult Whooper Swan is a large bird that ranges between 140-160 cm in length and has a wing span that ranges from 205-235 cm (Jonsson 1992). This makes them about the same size as our Trumpeter Swan (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The long bill is the best distinguishing feature with bright yellow covering the entire top of the bill to the dark eye and extending down the bill passed the nostril on the upper mandible where the two mandibles meet (Mullarney and

Zetterstrom 2009). The yellow also extends across the base of the underside of the lower mandible (Brazil 2009). The rest of the bill on the adult bird is black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rest of the bird from the head, neck, breast, wings and tail is white with black legs (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The immatures start out early in the fall looking gray-brown overall and become whiter by February-March (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). They also have dark legs (Jonsson 1992). The bill has the same pattern as the adults, but the yellow found on the adult is instead pinkish-gray (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Whooper Swan has a loud bugling call that is low in pitch and is often given in a series of three or four “*kloo-kloo-kloo-kloo*” calls (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

The adult Trumpeter Swan is similar in size to the Whooper Swan, but has a long black bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). When seen head on, the base of the bill creates a V shape at the base of the forehead (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In rare cases some Trumpeter Swans can have a tiny yellow spot where the bill meets the eye, but never show the yellow found on a Whooper Swan (D. Cecile pers. comm.).

The immature Trumpeter Swan is brownish overall and starts to become white in February (Sibley 2000). The bill is black at the base with pink in the center of the bill with a black line running along the lower area of the upper mandible where the 2 mandibles meet and has a black bill tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The lower mandible is black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The calls of the Trumpeter Swan are low in pitch and are given in a single or doubled honk which is similar to that of an old car horn. Often interpreted as “*hurp*” or “*hur di-di*” (Sibley 2000).

Both the Tundra Swan and the Eurasian form called “Bewick’s Swan” are much smaller birds with smaller bills (Dunn and Aldefer 2011). The adult Tundra Swan at its maximum of yellow is confined to the inner side of the bill (Sibley 2000). The amount of yellow can vary, but it doesn’t cut across the top of the bill or come as far down on the bill as in the Whooper Swan (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Eurasian form called “Bewick’s Swan” has extensive yellow on the bill, but is doesn’t reach or go past the nostril (Sibley 2000). Some birds have the yellow separated by black in the central part of the bill, while others have yellow that cuts across the top of the bill (Sibley 2000). In birds with extreme yellow, the yellow doesn’t reach the nostril (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The calls of the Tundra Swan are a high pitched honking and yodeling sound that is similar to the Whooping Swan, but higher pitched (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

As with many vagrant waterfowl, the status of Whooper Swan in British Columbia is complicated by the presence of known and suspected escapees, as it is elsewhere throughout continental North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Whooper Swan is popular in captivity, including in British Columbia, and numerous escapes have been documented across the continent (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Within British Columbia, three records are here considered likely to pertain to naturally-occurring vagrants, while an additional four records are considered to be of more uncertain origin or identification (Toochn *et al.* 2013a, see Table 1). The three accepted records of Whooper Swan in British Columbia have all occurred in November (range: 7-17 Nov), which coincides with the largest influx of migratory swans into the region from breeding areas to the north (Campbell *et al.* 1990); however, given the abundance of wintering swans in the region and the existence of winter records of the species from elsewhere in western North America, the Whooper Swan may be expected to occur any time during the late fall or winter. An April sighting in the southern Yukon (Cecile 2003) also suggests that the species could occur among flocks of northward bound swans in early spring (Sinclair *et al.* 2003). The first report of Whooper Swan in the province was a single individual observed traveling with a flock of 26 Trumpeter Swans at Port Hardy on northern Vancouver Island on November 11, 1977 (Campbell *et al.* 2001). As noted in Campbell *et al.* (2001), this record is particularly likely to pertain to a naturally-occurring vagrant based on an observation of two Whooper Swans with 26 Trumpeter Swans 19 days earlier at Cordova, Alaska. These two observations are thereby presumed to pertain to the same flock. A record of an adult Whooper Swan at Courtenay, Vancouver Island in November 5-7, 1998 (Bain and Shannon 1998, McEneaney 2004) is also accepted as likely pertaining to a natural vagrant. This record is considered slightly more suspect, however, as an individual of questionable origin (based on the seasonality of the sighting) was observed nearby at Seal Bay, Comox from July 25-27, 1996 (Innes 1997). The potential that the November 1998 observation pertained to the same individual that was detected in July 1996 cannot entirely be discounted; however, the time span between the records, coupled with the importance of the Courtenay area for wintering Trumpeter Swans and the timing of the 1998 sighting, suggest that the record is likely of a different individual and probably of a genuine vagrant. Note that the July 1996 record was accepted in Campbell *et al.* (2001) as a legitimate vagrant but, given the season of the sighting, and the lack of other summer sightings of this species elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, it is felt that the uncertainty regarding the origin of this individual is higher and, as a result, it is here excluded as a genuine vagrant. The third and final record that is considered to be of wild origin is an observation of an adult Whooper Swan paired with a Tundra Swan that had two hybrid juveniles at Mamit Lake, near Merritt, from November 7-17, 1999 (Campbell *et al.* 2001). These birds were traveling with a large flock of Tundra Swans. This record has been questioned (e.g., Brazil 2003) as perhaps pertaining to a known escaped Whooper Swan that bred with a Tundra

Swan near Calgary, Alberta in the summer of 1999, producing a family of hybrid young. The connection between the Calgary birds and the Mamit Lake birds was not substantiated, however, and it is felt that the timing of the observation, which coincided with the fall arrival of Tundra Swans, is consistent with the expectations of a legitimate vagrant; furthermore, any escaped swans in Alberta would be expected to remain with migratory swans in the Central Flyway, rather than move westward into the Pacific Flyway. As a result, this record is considered valid. Other records of Whooper Swans in British Columbia, including the suspected escapee at Comox in July 1996, a strongly suspected escapee that was seen periodically and photographed near Fairmont Hot Springs (Columbia Lake) between January 11, 2001 and July 12, 2002 (Toochin *et al.* 2013a), and an aberrant swan photographed at Courtenay, Vancouver Island on January 22, 2008 (Shuttleworth 2008) that could not be conclusively identified as a Whooper Swan are all considered questionable. As more observers scrutinize migratory flocks of Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, it seems only logical that more Whooper Swans will turn up in the future in British Columbia. Trying to figure out the origin of any of these future sightings will prove incredibly challenging.



Figure 1: Record #3: Whooper Swan adult (center bird) at Mamit Lake, north of Merritt on November 11, 1999. Photo © Jo Ann MacKenzie.

### **Table 1: Records of Whooper Swan for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult November 11, 1977: Tex Lyons, and other observers: near Port Hardy (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) adult November 5-7, 1998: Doug Innes, and other observers (photo) Courtenay – Comox area (Bain and Shannon 1998, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 3.(1) adult November 7-17, 1999: Wayne Weber, mobs (photo) Mamit Lake, 16 km south of Logan Lake (Shepard 2000, Toochin *et al.* 2013a)[paired with Tundra Swan with 2 hybrid young].

#### Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult July 25-27, 1996: Doug Innes, mobs: (BC Photo 1509) [origin?] Seal Bay in Courtenay-Comox (Bowling 1996, Toochin *et al.* 2013b)
- 2.(1) adult January 11, 2001-July 12, 2002: Larry Halverson (photo) [origin?] Fairmont Hot Springs, Columbia River (Toochin *et al.* 2013a)
- 3.(1) adult January 22, 2008: Dianne Shuttleworth (photo) Farquharson Farm, Comox (Shuttleworth 2008)

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