A single swan can make a difference

Harry G. Lumsden

A female Trumpeter Swan raised by a captive pair held at Wye Marsh, Ontario, has been the ancestor of a long line of offspring. She was hatched in 1990, wing clipped, marked with wing tag Number 100 and released in April 1991. By August 1991, she was flying. With no flying parents to lead her, she started to wander south in December. She was observed at two locations on Lake Simcoe, about 45 km. south of Wye Marsh. On 29 January, she was in the city of Burlington on the shore of Lake Ontario, about 75 km south of her previous sightings on Lake Simcoe, accompanied by two other Wye Marsh swans. They were last seen on Lake Ontario on 27 March, but by 8 April, she had made the 120 km-flight back to Wye Marsh. She stayed in Wye Marsh over the winter of 1992-93 and paired with Number 206. In 1993, their nest was the first in southern Ontario for over 200 years. She laid seven eggs and hatched six cygnets, all of which survived.

Part of Wye Marsh is open to hunting and, in late September, Number 100 was knocked down by an irresponsible hunter. A search by Don Foxall, one of the swan keepers at Wye Marsh, failed to find her body. Next morning, to everyone's surprise, she turned up in the Sanctuary area of Wye Marsh. She swam over a mile to return to her home territory.

By 8 December, she was flying with her family again, turning up at Port McNichol, just east of Wye Marsh. On 12 December, she led her family, including her mate who had not made the flight before, to Bronte Harbour near Burlington on Lake Ontario, not far from where she had wintered in 1991-92. Her span of wandering on the shore of Lake Ontario between December and March was about 22 km. On 30 March, the family had disappeared and was next seen at Wye Marsh on 31 March. On a straight line this would be only a 2.5-hour flight for a swan.

In 1994, Number 100 again nested at Wye Marsh and raised three cygnets. By 21 December, she was with her cygnets on Burlington Bay at the western end of Lake Ontario. She wintered in the same areas as in 1993-94. Her mate, Number 206, was missing and turned up at Bramalea on 18 December. He later wintered alone on Humber Bay on Lake Ontario.

Harry Lumsden, TTSS Director
Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources Retired,
144 Hillview, Aurora, Ontario L4G 2M5

Meanwhile, Number 100 left the Burlington area some time between 11 and 19 February, when she was seen again with her brood at Wye Marsh. By 26 February 1995, she had acquired a new mate, Number 338. They nested and raised a brood of six.

Last seen at Wye Marsh on 20 December, the family was reported at Cranberry Cove Park, northeast of Burlington on Lake Ontario on 22 December. On 25 February 1996, the pair was seen on Lake Ontario, but was at Wye Marsh on the 26th. Number 100 laid eight eggs, but her old mate 206 returned, fought with Number 338 and drove him off. She deserted her nest and spent the summer unpaired on Wye Marsh. Her deserted eggs were placed in an incubator and three hatched.

Without a brood, she and mate 206 did not migrate to the shore of Lake Ontario in the winter of 1996-97. In the summer of 1997, the pair moved to a strip of marsh on the Wye River where they raised five cygnets. They moved late that winter and were not seen at their usual locations on Lake Ontario until 1 January 1998. They stayed until at least 21 February, but were back at Wye Marsh on 28 February.

In 1998, Female 100 nested again on the Wye River and hatched seven cygnets, but lost three. She wintered with her four cygnets and mate at Wye Marsh, but on 1 March 1999, her mate and one cygnet were killed when they flew into hydro wires. The cygnet contained 71 lead pellets and had 10 ppm lead in its tissues.

By 19 April 1999, she had formed a new pair bond with Number 366, which was her grandson. They disappeared for the summer and may have nested unsuccessfully at nearby Sucker Creek. In the fall and early winter, they remained at Wye Marsh where they were last seen on 25 January 2000. The next recorded sighting was on 29 January at Bronte Beach on Lake Ontario. They stayed until at least 21 February, but were back at Wye Marsh on 29 February. They were at Sucker Creek in May of 2000, had four cygnets with them in August, but only three in September.

The brood was last seen on 28 November 2000 near Penetanguishene in the Wye Marsh area and then was next recorded at Bronte Beach on 19 December. The swan family was regularly seen throughout January and February until 4 March. On 23 April 2000, the pair was back at Sucker Creek and started to nest. Then, a disgraceful incident occurred. A couple in a fast boat deliberately ran over Number 100, breaking her wing in two places. She was rescued and has been under treatment since.

Female 100's offspring from 1993, 1994, 1995 and two of her cygnets from 2000 were banded and marked with wing tags. Of these marked birds, at least six are known to have nested and their offspring in turn have

bred. Number 100 is known to have produced at least 70 descendants, many of which migrate from the Wye Marsh area to winter on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario. In the winter of 2000-01, about half of the 58 swans that wintered in the Burlington area were from Wye Marsh.

This story has some bearing on the problem of the future of the Greater Yellowstone population of Trumpeter Swans. The accidental kill of trumpeters during a Tundra Swan hunt, although probably very small, may be very important in the ultimate survival of that genetically discrete Trumpeter Swan population. It may not take many pioneers from the Greater Yellowstone breeding population to establish a migratory tradition. This should have the effect of returning birds in better condition and, therefore, more productive to the breeding grounds. Tundra Swan hunting on the Bear River Refuge should be observed carefully to determine the impact on trumpeters. There must be adequate monitoring of the use of new areas by pioneering trumpeters. Indeed, every bird is important at this stage, especially females.