

A New Era for The Swan

Column and Photography by Hamish Tear



The WY Wetlands Society improves wetlands throughout the state, providing a habitat for waterfowl and other species.

Bill Long, a biologist and conservation officer with Wyoming Game and Fish, founded the Wyoming Wetlands Society (WWS) in 1982. "The goal of the WWS is to improve wetlands throughout the state, and to provide habitat for waterfowl and other species for future generations," he explains.

The model and purpose of the WWS emulates that of Ducks Unlimited, which protects vast wetland expanses of Canada and several regions of the US. Long's emphasis was on ponds and larger areas of open water, which are more useful to transient and summering waterfowl. Not only would the ponds attract and benefit plentiful birds like mallards and Canada geese, but rarer birds such as canvas backs and trumpeter swans would be encouraged. Ponds also comprise of complex biological systems and beneficial aquatic plants such as sedges, which in turn contribute to the larger ecosystem. "Wetlands are Nature's most efficient water purifiers," Long points out. "Silt-laden or other polluted water is slowed and absorbed by the dense aquatic vegetation, impurities sink to the bottom and the cleanest of water flows out of the other side." Wetlands help to control flooding from mountain snow run-offs or mid-summer downpours; they are places of recreation for the human population.

A complimentary, original goal of the WWS was to help with the reintroduction of trumpeter swans. Long had already been

a trumpeter swan breeder and the species now had the recipe it needed most to make a come-back – a biological specialist empowering people to not only raise new and genetically strong populations of swans, but also to secure appropriate ranges of habitat.

Meriwether Lewis wrote about the trumpeter swan as he crossed the wetlands of Montana's Blackfoot Valley in 1806. He was enchanted by the distinct trumpet call, and noted its wingspan of up to eight feet, making it North America's largest waterfowl. Ironically, the Lewis and Clark Expedition would soon lead to the almost complete disappearance of this most beautiful and gracious bird. These easy-to-catch beauties were hunted for their skins and plumage for ladies fashion accessories – over 17,000 swan skins were collected by the Hudson's Bay Company between 1853 and 1877.

The species was thought to be gone forever, until a small population was discovered in select thermal wetlands in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming in the 1930's. They had survived by chance because of the unique combined circumstances of their location: The rugged remoteness of the lakes hindered human discovery, and the thermal wetlands provided them with year-round water, food and secure nesting. There were a total of 69 birds which had become inbred and non-migratory. Their viability was therefore in question as reintroduction was considered. By the 1960's, with enlightened hearts and minds, a few good people set to work to springboard a new era for the trumpeter swan.

Eggs were taken from descendents of the 69 birds, some from remaining Canadian flocks, raised in zoos and bred by specialists, and then cross-bred for genetic diversity. By the 1980's target numbers were being achieved, although not in the Rocky Mountain Region, and not as migratory species. The recovery efforts had relied on feeding and protecting the swans