

SWAN FACT SHEET 2020

Margaret Campbell

Canadian Wildlife Service – Environment and Climate Change Canada

867-393-6825

margaret.campbell@canada.ca

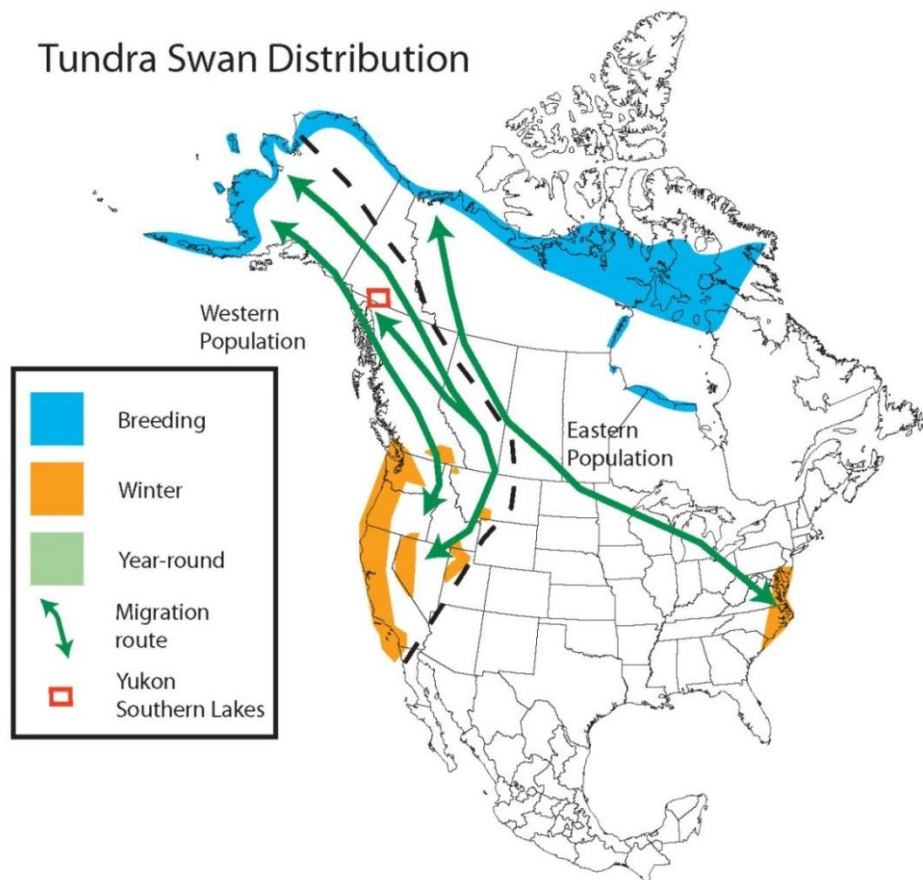
Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*)

Western Population (WP)

- Surveyed on their breeding grounds in Alaska: Yukon Delta Coastal Zone Survey (Alaska) + Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (WBPHS strata 8,9,10,11)
- Western population total swan index: 101,000 (-33% from 2018)
- Non-significant increasing trend over the past 10 years (+1%/year)
- Population trend has been stable since the start of the survey but tends to vary more than eastern population
- 4-17% pass over Whitehorse during migration or 4,000 – 17,000 swans
- Fly over Whitehorse every year but fewer spend time at Swan Haven than in the past

Eastern Population (EP)

- Surveyed in mid-winter in eastern/coastal USA
- 93,000 in 2018 mid-winter survey (-17% vs 2017)
- Non-significant increasing trend for this population over 10 years(+1%/year)
- These birds don't show up in the Yukon since they migrate through the interior of the continent and breed in the arctic east of the Seward Peninsula of Alaska. But may breed on YT's North Slope



Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*)

Estimated North American Population: 63,016, 6.6% growth /year since 1968

Pacific Coast Population (PCP)

- 24,240 in 2015 (entire population), 5.5% annual growth rate (1968-2015)
- 2,225 in 2015 (YT and northern BC population), 14.5% annual growth rate (1985 -2015)
- 31-75% pass over Whitehorse during migration or 5,400 – 13,164 swans (based on figures from 2001 – 2003)
- A slightly lower proportion probably pass through Whitehorse now since the population has increased substantially but the counts at Swan Haven have not increased that much.

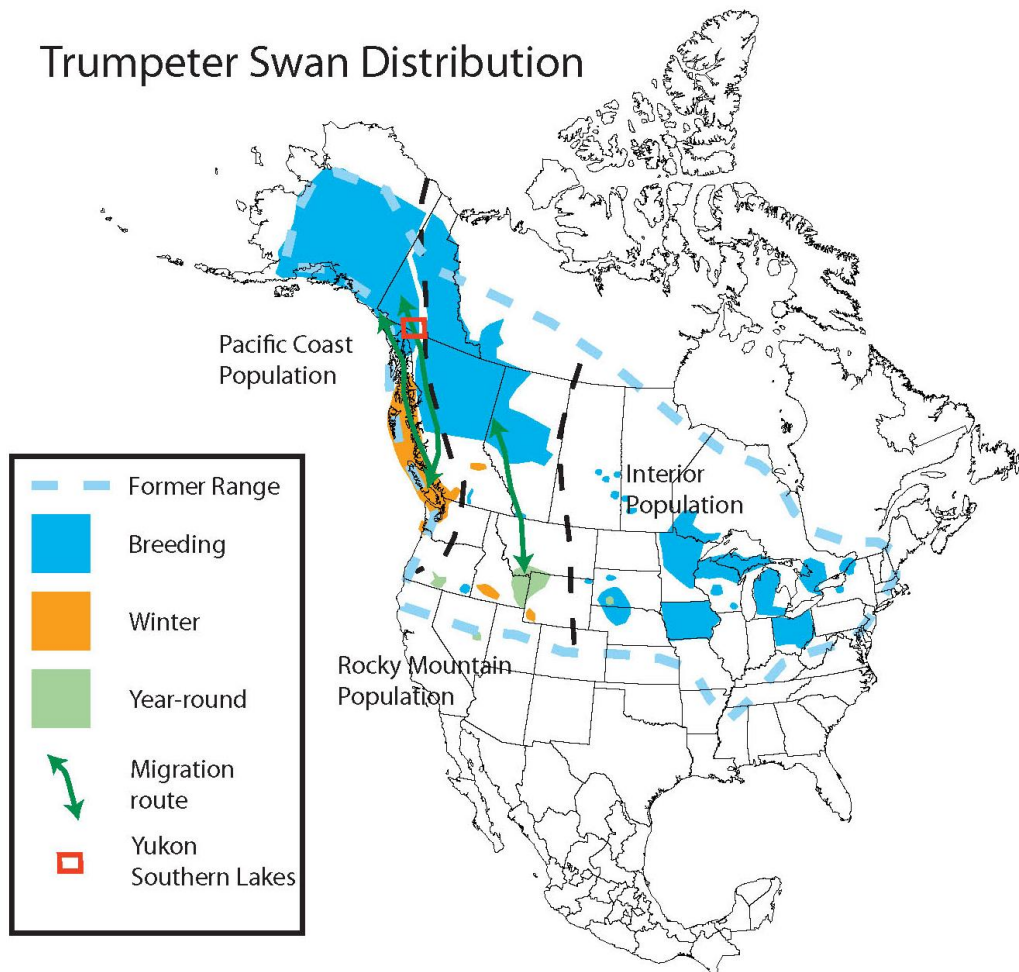
Rocky Mountain Population (RMP)

- 11,721 in 2015 (entire population), 6.5% average annual growth rate (1968 -2015)
- 10,957 in 2015 (Canadian population: YT/BC/NWT/AB), 11.5% annual growth rate (1968-2015)
- These birds generally don't pass through Swan Haven or Tagish during migration but some might be expected to appear at Johnson's Crossing.

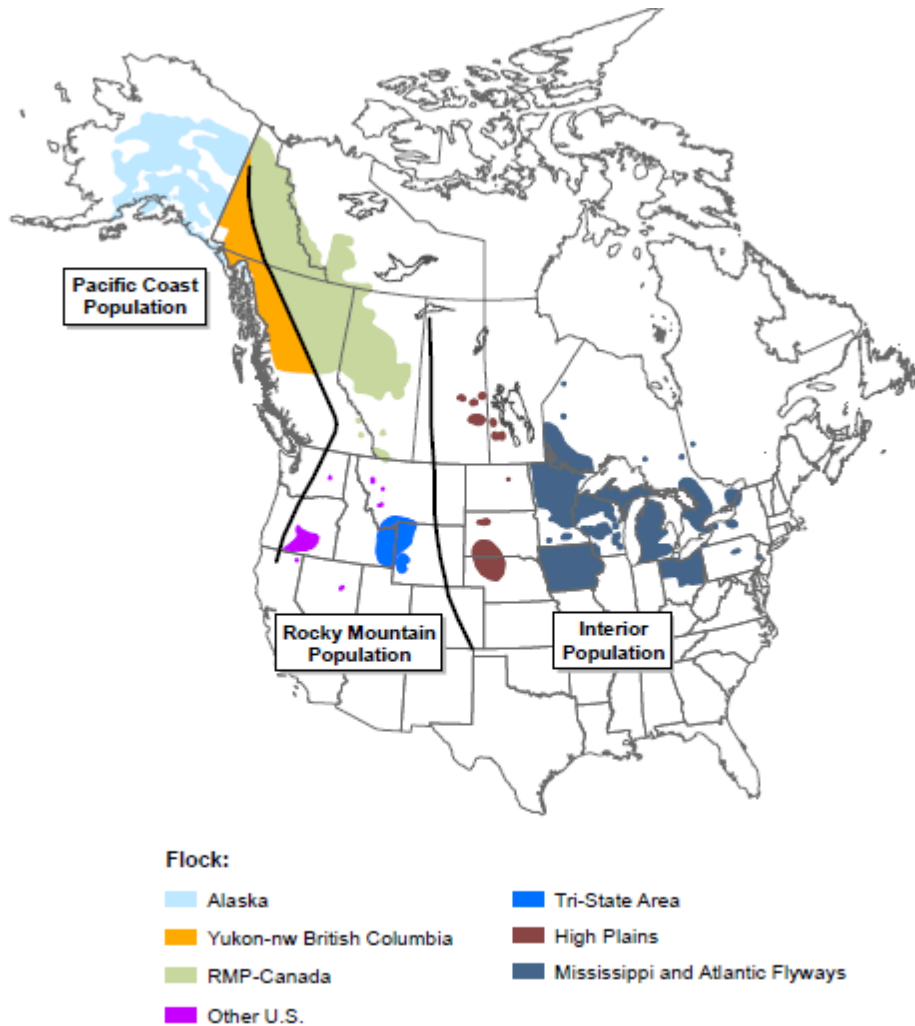
Interior Population (IP)

- 27,055 in 2015 (entire population), 14.4% annual growth rate (1968 – 2015)
- **Preliminary estimates** for 2015: 2,000 swans in Ontario double the 2010 estimates
- Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba counted 97 swans in 2015 a 185% increase vs 2010
- These birds don't show up in the Yukon since they migrate through the center of the continent and breed east of the Rocky Mountains in ON/MB/SK.

Trumpeter Swan Distribution



TRUMPETER SWAN FLOCKS/SUB-POPULATIONS



Differences between swans:

The best way to tell them apart is the call

Trumpeter Swan:

- Larger (length 138 - 158cm, wingspan 203cm, weight 7.4 – 12.7kg)
- Red line on lower mandible (very difficult to see from afar)
- Sound: distinct two-noted "oh-oh" call with quality of a brass trumpet
- Average flock size 6.5
- Young Trumpeters in the spring will be greyish in colour and easily distinguished from their parents

Tundra Swan:

- Smaller (length 120 - 147cm, wingspan 168cm, weight 3.8 - 10.5kg)
- Small (and variable) yellow tear drop next to eye
- Sound: a soft goose-like honk or blugling "who-ooo"

- Average flock size 35.
- Large flocks in flight (50+ birds) are likely to be Tundra Swans
- Young Tundra swans will be white and almost identical in colour to their parents in the spring

FAQ:

Where do they spend the WINTER?

Trumpeter Swan:

- Along the coast of BC, Washington and south east Alaska.
- Smaller numbers at some inland lakes and rivers in interior BC.
- Largest numbers winter on Vancouver Island, Lower Mainland of BC and adjacent areas of Washington State

Tundra Swan:

- Western US states: California, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Oregon

Why do swans stop here?

- To feed and rest to replenish energy resources before continuing their migration towards their nesting wetlands.
- Warm water from deeper layers of Marsh Lake flows through M'Clintock Bay to the Yukon River and keeps parts of it ice-free throughout most of the winter.
- Lake outlets are the first places with open water and access to aquatic plants in the spring.
- Water levels in the bay are at their lowest in the spring making food reserves (aquatic plants) available for the birds.
- The water carried by the M'Clintock River is loaded with silt. The silt is deposited in M'Clintock Bay forming a large delta at the mouth of the river. The accumulation of silt produces a nutrient-rich base that supports a lush growth of aquatic plants.

Where are the swans passing through Swan Haven going?

Trumpeter Swan:

- Large marshy wetlands in central Alaska and western Yukon
- Below the treeline (i.e. forested lakes/wetlands)

Tundra Swans:

- Ponds along the northwest coast of Alaska
- Above the treeline (i.e. tundra)

Where are the closest nesting areas for Trumpeter Swans?

- Whitehorse is thought to be the dividing line between nesting grounds of the PCP and RMP.
- Trumpeter Swans of the PCP nest south of Whitehorse in the Mountains (e.g. Fish Lake, Rose Lake), west of Whitehorse on the Mendenhall River and Taye Lake and north of Whitehorse on the Nordenskiöld River.

- RMP Trumpeter Swans nest east of Whitehorse on the Nisutlin River.

What are they eating?

- They feed on leaves, tubers and roots of aquatic plants at depths of up to 1m.
- At Swan Haven their diet is likely the tubers and roots of various pondweeds (*Potamogeton spp.*)

What are the little birds out there?

- They are adult ducks. Not baby swans.
- Over 20 species of waterfowl use M'Clintock Bay as a "pit-stop" along their migration route.
- Young Trumpeter Swans hatched last summer, now about 9 months old, are greyish and similar in size to adults, are usually still found closely accompanying their parents. Most families at this time of year have 1-4 youngsters.

Why are they so darn noisy?

- It is getting near the nesting season and any young adults without mates are probably interested in finding one.
- They are all trying to get enough to eat and each pair or family doesn't necessarily like other swans invading its personal space or feeding area. This can lead to a lot of "disagreements".
- Every honk, call or gesture is a signal to other swans just like when we talk to each other and see each other's body language. Watch for a while and see if you can tell what their body language means.

How do I know if I am getting too close to a group of swans?

- In some wintering areas Trumpeter Swans have learned to live quite close to lots of people, traffic, and such. But they don't like surprises. Jumping out of your car, making a lot of noise, or running towards them will have predictable effects -- they will probably fly or swim away.
- If you let them know you are there, but you are quiet, patient, and move slowly and deliberately, you can often get quite close to them. Whenever they stop what they are doing and raise their heads, that means they are getting a bit alarmed. This is your signal to stop what you are doing and wait quietly until they return to their previous activity (resting, feeding, etc.) - this means they know you are there but they don't think you are a problem.
- Generally, the closer you get the more carefully they will watch you and the more careful you must be. If you are part of a normal routine that is repeated constantly and does not pose a threat, they will likely just ignore you.
- Sometimes you may encounter Trumpeter swans that are very tame -- this is a real treat so enjoy it but please do not betray their trust by doing anything to scare or hurt them.
- Please use your knowledge of swans wisely by not causing them to swim or fly away from their feeding and resting areas. And be considerate of other people who also may be watching the same swans.

What makes the slapping noise when they take off?

- Their feet. They run along the water to help them get airborne.

Does anything eat them?

- Wolf
- Fox
- Coyote
- Eagle
- Black and Grizzly Bear
- Wolverine
- Sometimes people!

How do we know how many there swans there are in the western North American population?

Trumpeter Swans

- Trumpeter Swans have been surveyed simultaneously every 5 years on their breeding grounds by federal, provincial and state agencies in the U.S. since 1968.
- Survey was originally designed as a complete census (i.e. count all the birds across the entire range) but as populations have increased a stratified random sampling approach has been used (i.e. randomly selecting map grids to survey which are likely to have breeding swans).
- 2010 was the first time the entire Canadian breeding range of the PCP and RMP (excluding very sparsely occupied regions of northern Yukon and north-central BC) was surveyed.
- Most recent survey completed in 2015 but data are still preliminary

Tundra Swans

- Since Tundra Swans nest in remote and inaccessible Arctic areas information from the USFWS Mid-winter Waterfowl Survey is used to estimate their population.
- This is a nationwide survey in the United States that attempts to get a complete count of waterfowl (ducks/swans/geese) in areas of major concentration on their wintering areas.
- Most surveys are done using fixed-wing aircraft but can also be completed using helicopters, boats or ground counts.

Hunting

Trumpeter Swans

- Hunting is illegal in Canada and the U.S. but certain First Nations have harvest rights.
- In the past hunting caused population declines and local extirpations.

Tundra Swans

- No hunting season in Canada but certain First Nations have harvest rights.
- There is a tightly regulated annual harvest in the U.S.A since 1983 for the Eastern Population and 1962 for the Western Population.
- In some U.S. states along the Pacific Flyway hunting is allowed during fall migration.

Swans as an endangered species (Trumpeter Swan)

- Down to a few thousand individuals or less by 1935
- No one is sure of exact lowest number because breeding populations were so isolated in central Yukon and Alaska

Declined:

- Due to overhunting for trade in quills and skins
- Market in recreational and subsistence hunting.

Brought Back By:

- Strict hunting regulations
- Re-introduction to former breeding areas
- Some winter feeding has helped boost winter survival and numbers

Status:

- Downgraded from Endangered Species to “special concern” in 1978
- Designated “Not at risk” by COSEWIC in 1996

Historical Range:

- South to Mason-Dixon line (around Utah, Nevada and Tennessee), north to Main and New Brunswick, a bit of southern Quebec, and most of Ontario, western provinces, southern NWT and, of course, Yukon and Alaska.

Current Numbers:

- Last census had numbers of ~46,000 Trumpeter Swans though the error range of the population estimate has decreased significantly.
- Range (geographical) range continues to expand yearly
- Have adapted to eat agricultural crops

Current Challenges:

- Winter habitat degradation due to urbanization in the south
- Some difficulties with lead-shot poisoning. In areas where swans eat agricultural crops where people have been shooting skeet or other waterbirds, or in wetlands where waterbird hunting has happened swans will eat the shot, either accidentally or as “pebbles” to grind up food in their gizzard, and are poisoned.
- No open season for hunting Trumpeter swans but certain First Nations have harvest rights.