



by Keith Sutton

Photos by Keith Sutton



*Trumpeter swans disappeared from Arkansas for more than 80 years. Now they're back, and a visit to their winter homes around Heber Springs may allow wildlife watchers to see and photograph scores of these magnificent waterfowl.*

# Take a Trip to See the Swans

If you have time this month, let me suggest that you drive up to Heber Springs to see the trumpeter swans that winter there. On several lakes near the Cleburne County community, visitors have the opportunity to see scores of these magnificent waterfowl, a real treat for anyone who enjoys wildlife watching.

Trumpeter swans hadn't been seen in Arkansas for more than 80 years when the first members of this modern group showed up on Magness Lake just outside Heber Springs in January 1991. Four avid birdwatchers were amazed to spot the species and were unsure if the birds really could be trumpeters. When one of the birds called, though, there was no doubt as to the birds' identity. The loud, trumpet-like sound from which the species takes its name is a dead giveaway. There were three dusky-brown juveniles that had apparently been pushed off course by a winter storm. At the time, the North American population of the species was still recovering after years at the brink of extinction. The swans were an amazing find.

No one expected the swans would return to Magness Lake after their first visit. But they must have liked what

they found because they came again and brought friends and families. Two adults showed up at Christmas in 1991—an adult female banded in Minnesota and her mate. They stayed until the end of February along with two more adults that arrived in January. The next winter, the banded female and her mate returned with three cygnets (juvenile swans). Since then, the numbers have fluctuated, but in recent years, more than 150 swans have been spotted on the lake at one time. Several nearby lakes now also host wintering populations.

To view the swans, drive east toward Wilburn on Arkansas Highway 110 from its intersection with the Arkansas 5/25 bypass on the eastern edge of Heber Springs. Go 3.9 miles from the intersection and turn left onto Hays Road (Little Red River Bible Church is directly across from the turn). The parking area beside Magness Lake is just before the S-curve about one-half mile down Hays Road.

Magness Lake is on private land now owned by the family of Larry and Patti Eason. Visitors are asked to park only in the designated area and leave pets at home. Please avoid littering, climbing on the fence or blocking gated roads.

In recent years, the trumpeter swans have wintered on two nearby lakes as well. Both are on Hiram Road and provide viewing areas with gravel parking lots. To reach these lakes from Hays Road, continue on Highway 110 east toward Wilburn for 1 mile and turn right on Cutoff Road (gravel). Continue 0.7 mile to paved Hiram Road and turn left. The first lake is on the left 2.1 miles from this turn. You'll pass through a white pipe gate into the parking area. The second lake is 0.6 miles past this one. You'll see a large red-and-white "Water for Sale" sign at the left hand turn into the parking area. These, too, are privately owned lakes, so please show all courtesies.

The trumpeters usually arrive around mid-November and stay until late February. You're likely to see at least a few regardless of the time of day, but the best viewing and photo opportunities often are near dawn and dusk. Many guests bring deer corn to feed the birds and draw them near. This is OK but other items should not be fed to the swans, and people should not try to hand-feed or touch them.

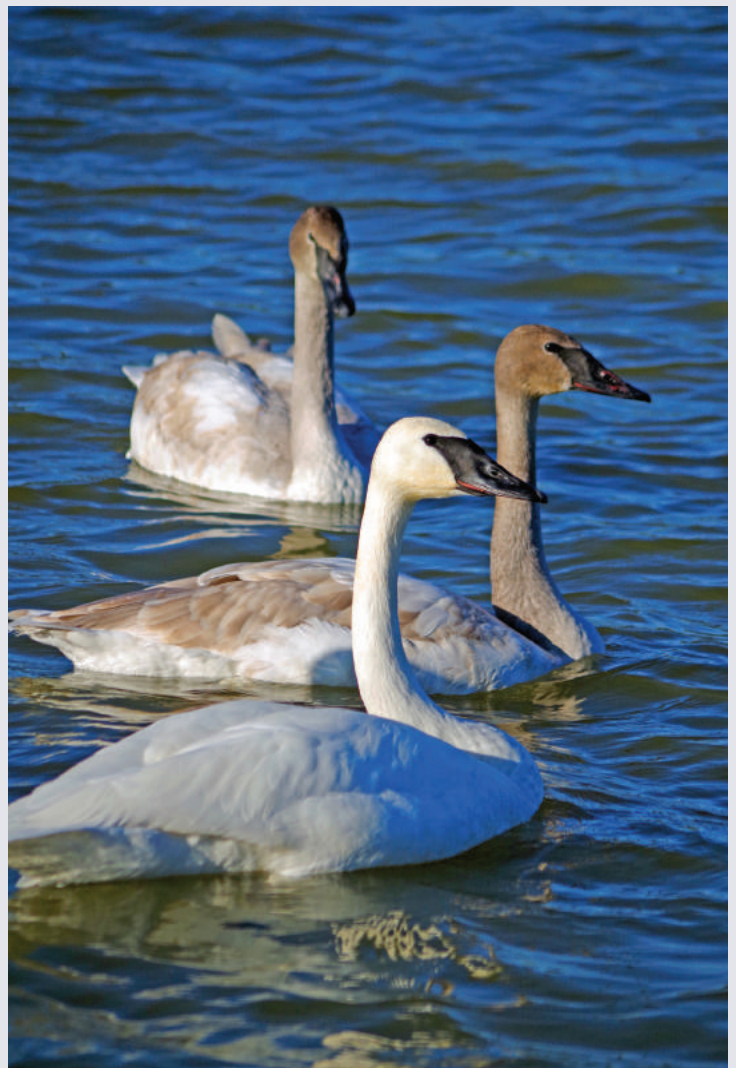
In addition to trumpeter swans, visitors often see the smaller tundra swan and a variety of ducks and geese, including ring-necked ducks, buffleheads, mallards, canvasbacks, Canada geese and snow geese.

On my most recent visit, I arrived at sunrise, and several dozen swans were already present. Other birds soon flew in, too, touching down with loud honks and splashing. Many were juveniles dressed in dusky plumage, but most were snow-white adults with jet-black bills and legs.

Ordinarily, trumpeter swans are hard to approach. The Heber Springs birds have become accustomed to humans, however, allowing people extraordinary opportunities to view and photograph them. Standing within a few feet of North America's largest species of waterfowl is an experience few observers ever forget. The swans are gigantic, sometimes weighing 38 pounds and standing 4 feet tall. They are strikingly beautiful, with long, graceful necks, snowy feathers and expressive black eyes.

I photographed flying swans, swimming swans, feeding swans, preening swans and resting swans. I snapped pictures when they stood tall on the water and flapped their wings, and captured images of family groups with parent birds and cygnets together.

If you've never seen the swans, by all means try to find time to go this year. If you can't, then plan a visit next fall when the swans return once again. To stand on the banks of these Cleburne County lakes and see scores of trumpeter swans is an experience you definitely don't want to miss. •



*Trumpeter swans mate for life and live together as family groups of dusky-brown juveniles and snowy-white adults. The young birds, called cygnets, learn their migration routes from their parents.*



*The swans that visit the Heber Springs area each fall and winter provide unique opportunities for up-close photography and viewing by people like Zach Sutton of Alexander.*