

Copy

### THE STORY OF THE SWAN SONG IS NOT ALL MYTH

The Swan is the favorite bird of medieval history and mythology. Its song has been a symbol of death for many years and is not entirely a myth. D. G. Elliot, one of the older ornithologists, reports that he heard it once at Currituck Sound when a swan in the air, mortally wounded, set its wings and sailed slowly downward. Its death song continued until it reached the water nearly a half mile away. This was unlike any other swan note, plaintive and musical like the soft running of the notes in an octave.

The large size of the swan and its conspicuous color have made it a shining mark for gunners. The older birds are about as tough and unfit for food as an old horse. However, until these birds were protected by the federal law, it was "sport" to kill them. In earlier days, fashion called for swans-down. Thousands of swans' skins were handled in pioneer days by the Hudson's Bay Company. It is now an unusual sight to see a wedge of these magnificent snow-white birds. Vast flocks formerly migrated across our continent, but the change of conditions and the insatiable desire to kill have almost locked the trumpeting of these big birds in the silence of the past.

Two species of swan are found in this country. Both were recorded along the Columbia River by Lewis and Clark in 1805 and 1806. The common American or Whistling Swan was named *cygnus Columbianus* from the Columbia River.

The Trumpeter Swan was discovered on the Columbia River by Lewis and Clark, but it was not named as a separate species until 1831. This is larger than the Whistling Swan, but the size is a difficult mark of distinction unless both species are together. The Whistling Swan has a distinct yellow spot in front of the eye. This is lacking in the Trumpeter.



The breeding range of the Whistling Swan is near the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Some spend the winter along the southern Atlantic and some on the Pacific Coast. Formerly large flocks frequented the Columbia River, but the main line of migration was east of the Cascade Range where the birds rested and fed in the lake region of southern Oregon and northern California.

The Swan Song might well be applied to the Trumpeter because for many years he has been at the point of final disappearance. His nesting range was the interior of North America and especially the north central states from Iowa and the Dakotas northward. The drying up of breeding areas and the great change through this part of the country have almost led to its complete extermination. Fortunately in recent years, a few pairs have been discovered breeding in Yellowstone Park, Montana and Canada. The efforts to protect these breeding areas have so far prevented the last Swan Song. The numbers are few, but rigid protection may keep some of them with us.

The swans that are seen in parks and zoological gardens are as a rule not of a species native to America. The European Whistling Swan, sometimes called Whooper, has a note like a bass trombone. The Old World is also the home of the Mute Swan, so called because it is said to lose its voice when domesticated. The celebrated Black Swan of Australia is one that is domesticated and breeds in various parts of the country.