

WHISTLING SWANS. (*Olor columbianus*.)

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There has been a wonderful increase in the number of Whistling Swans of late years noticeably since the enactment of the Migratory Bird Treaty. Direct and spectacular evidence of this is given in the large numbers of the birds which fly over Detroit and vicinity, and the increasingly large numbers which remain in that neighborhood for weeks during the spring when all shooting is prohibited.

It has not been so long since the appearance of a single swan during the spring migration was a source of wonder and gratification to the observer, and in the fall the bird was unnoted. Two years ago last March one swan spent three days in the canals of Belle Isle, Detroit's beautiful playground, having taken shelter there from a violent storm which was raging. The bird was very shy and usually saw you first, departing hastily as you approached. I tramped over the island every day in the early morning and found the bird only when the swish of his big wings told me he was leaving, and as there are about 20 miles of canals and inland lakes on the island, it was quite a task. I also saw one bird flying high another morning that spring. In the fall of that year I saw no swans although hunters told me that a few had been seen at the Flats. But one morning in the spring of 1919 I saw two swans resting on the main channel of the Detroit River immediately south of Belle Isle. They discovered me almost at the same moment and rising flew swiftly toward Lake St. Clair, their great wings flapping and their feet paddling the water as they went.

Later that same morning as I was tramping through the woods at the upper end of the island I heard the plaintive notes of a number of swans, distant but coming nearer, a sound familiar enough in my childhood when I lived in Northern Michigan and swans were so common as to excite little interest. The weather was cold and foggy, with no wind or perceptible air movement; and the birds, flying low, merely skimming the tree tops, came directly over me; and I had a splendid chance to observe their formation. There were 25 birds in the long wedge-shaped flock, 10 individuals on one side and 15 on the other, each bird equally spaced from the other and each line as accurate as though spaced and limned by the hand of a master. The birds were honking sonorously, my ear catching generally about three notes, one very low and two quite high. The higher notes predominated.

I spent the day on the island. The fog lifted soon. All day swans were flying back and forth showing that they were not in migration but had stopped to rest and feed. At one time I counted 70 birds in the air, the biggest flock containing 35 birds flying in two long V-shaped lines, the others being in lesser flocks and flying singly. The largest flock that I saw that day contained about 200 birds flying in a long zigzag line quite like a huge piece of rickrack lace stretched across the sky.

From the first week in March until the middle of April swans could be seen every day, sometimes on the river, more often on the wing; and they were as abundant at the Flats as Canada Geese which are always

quite common in that vicinity every spring. It certainly marked the spring migration as one of unusual interest.

But the limit of swan flocks had not been reached in the spring migration. On the first day of November I saw a most wonderful flight of swans. First there came a distant chorus of swan notes so vast in volume that it reached my ears some moments before the flock came into sight. The birds were flying very high. Words are totally inadequate to describe the grandeur and glory of that most wonderful flock. Heading it and stretching apparently almost across the width of Belle Isle where it is about half a mile wide, was a line of fully 300 birds swinging majestically along in great crescent formation followed by a similar line broken, however, near the center where there was a considerable space vacant and followed by smaller groups and birds flying singly and in twos and threes. Using my field glasses I noted that what seemed to be a mere jumble of birds in the vanguard was really a most orderly grouping of symmetrical units, all spaced and lined according to the most approved swan rules. Off to one side one great pure white bird flew along in grand style uttering his "honk, honk" in true basso profundo. He was of the flock yet not in it and I wondered if he was an outlaw who had determined to remain by the flock until he had obtained, if not the leadership, at least a respectable following. In its entirety the flock seemed to be composed about equally of old and young, birds in the grey plumage of the spring hatch and old pure white birds being intermingled.

This flock, apparently in full migration, swept on like a stupendous squadron of aeroplanes. Many of the birds were honking and in ensemble there was the same predominance of the higher notes as observed in the smaller flocks. They had come, perhaps, from the regions north of Lake Superior and would not stop until the Monroe Marshes in Lake Erie would be reached where breakfast would be served.

The most conspicuous fact in the flight of migrating swans is their unchanging lines. In the flight of Canada Geese every one has seen first one strenuous old gander and then another lead the flock, the leadership apparently going to the best man, while the remainder of the flock sway and change from long V-shape to short V-shape; or, for a time all fly in "company front". The swans seem to assemble in unchanging formation without fluctuations even among the lesser units. This statement is subject to modification but in all the flocks that I have yet seen it holds good. Even when the birds are startled when feeding and rise quickly they assume almost instantly the long slanting line or the wedge-shaped formation, each bird taking its position without confusion. It is just like a street parade in which every one knows exactly where he is to be and takes his position without ado; however, in the case of the swans it is done more expeditiously. The reason for the uniform spacing and divergent lines may be that each individual must have an unobstructed outlook and flying in this fashion it is always obtained.

The spring migration this year was about like that of last year in numbers and duration, although some few birds had remained on the Detroit River all winter and had become so tame that they came up to the yard of the residence of a man in Wyandotte Heights for the food that he threw

out to them. Eventually they were both shot by a vandal who so far has escaped justice.

The great flocks passed over Detroit in the night during this fall's migration. It was most impressive to hear in the darkness of midnight their voices intermingling and blending most delightfully, as they winged their way over the vast mileage of their unmarked aerial highway. What inner knowledge is it that holds these birds and others on the correct course without sign marks, without beacons or range lights or without the aid of a more or less uncivil station agent? Does not each bird hold within the recesses of his heart a true compass? Does he not also hold in that heart of his a complete calendar which tells him when it is time to start north or south according to the time of the year? Daylight or darkness are alike to him and he keeps on his unvarying way through sunshine or the blackness of the moonless night.

The stork has certainly been kind to the ladies of the swan family, and with the protection of two paternal governments it would seem that they will again be able to raise their young and again become quite common.

It would be interesting to learn if there has been a corresponding increase in the number of Trumpeter Swans (*Olor buccinator*). These birds formerly were not strangers in the Lake region although they were never as common as the Whistling Swans; but during each spring and fall migration an occasional one was noted. I last heard one about 15 years ago in May, the month in which they were most apt to be seen. One still morning on Grand Traverse Bay, just as the rosy light was creeping over the water putting to flight the delicate hues of mauve, green, and amber, burnishing the silver surface of the water and changing it to pinkish gold, I was startled and awakened from slumber by the glorious call of the great Trumpeter Swan,—“Ah-ah-ah-way, ah-ah-ah-way”. Far out on the lovely water swam this beautiful bird, alone save for his reflection on the silvered surface. Like a ghost he was, a ghost of all the wonderful company of his kind that had gone before.

