

# Wintering Trumpeter Swans in Southern Illinois

By Dana Varner and Michael Eichholz

This Trumpeter Swan at Sandhill State Wildlife Area in Wisconsin during the summer was later seen wintering in Illinois.  
Photo by Dana Varner



## Introduction

One of the most inspiring conservation success stories in recent years may be that of the Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*). The historic breeding and wintering range of Trumpeter Swans once covered much of North America, including the upper Midwest, the Lower Mississippi River south to the Gulf Coast, and parts of the Atlantic Coast (Banko 1960). By the end of the 19th century, the species was likely extirpated from the midwest. Trumpeter Swans have since made a dramatic recovery and now sightings occur in all Midwestern states, including Illinois. Thanks to reintroduction programs that began almost 50 years ago Trumpeter Swans in the Mid-

west, also known as the Interior Population (IP), numbered more than 4,750 birds in 2005 (Moser 2006).

In 1960, the first reintroduction of Trumpeter Swans to the IP was made in South Dakota (Hansen 1973). The second release took place in 1966 in Minnesota (Hansen 1973). Since the 1960s, many states have initiated reintroduction programs to restore Trumpeter Swans, including Illinois' northern neighbor, Wisconsin. A total of 387 trumpeters were raised and released in Wisconsin between 1989 and 2005 (Matteson, pers. comm.). The original goal of the trumpeter program was to attain a minimum population of 20 breeding, migratory pairs (Ad hoc Swan Committee 1998). The reintroduction was successful, and today the population of Trumpeter Swans in Wisconsin is estimated



A Trumpeter Swan seen in Wisconsin during the summer is seen here in southern Illinois at the Burning Star reclaimed strip mine during winter. Note the neck band numbers.

Photo by Dana Varner

to include 96 breeding pairs among more than 500 individuals (Matteson, pers. comm.). More than half of these swans are estimated to migrate to Illinois during the winter (Matteson, pers. comm.).

## Issues

Despite these impressive successes, some problems remain. A lack of migratory behaviors and suitable wintering areas is considered to be the greatest obstacle to the complete recovery of the IP to a healthy, self-sustaining population (Mitchell 1994). In some states, a large proportion of the trumpeters do not migrate to wintering sites below 40° N latitude, which runs just north of Springfield, Illinois (Gillette 1997). Swans that remain north during the winter often cannot survive without human intervention such as supplemental feeding, aerators to keep the water open, or power plants that release warm water and keep large stretches of river open throughout the winter. During exceptionally harsh winters these areas may freeze over causing large die-offs among non-migratory birds (Linck 1997, Drewien et al. 2002). If these swans migrated to more appropriate areas to the south, they would not be exposed to this risk during harsh winter conditions. There also are many dangers associated with long migrations. It is unknown whether mortality is higher for migratory or non-migratory populations of Trumpeter Swans. Additionally, there is some concern whether good wintering areas are still available in the south (Mitchell 1994). Most wetlands in southern states, including Illinois, have been drained and converted to agricultural fields (Dahl and Johnson 1991).

Many waterfowl species have adapted to a lack of suitable aquatic habitat by foraging in agricultural fields, usually to their benefit