

COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS
SIGHT RECORD FORM

RESULTS: _____

✓ 11-97-28

ACCEPTED 7-0

SPECIES: Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator*DATES: NOV. 18, 1997, found and identified. Remained at locality through Nov. 24,
then returned on Nov. 29.

NUMBER OF BIRD SEEN: One SEX: ? PLUMAGE: Adult

LOCATION: Gravel pit lakes between I-70 and Colorado River at Dotsero.

COUNTY: Eagle NEAREST TOWN: Dotsero (not a town, but on the map) ELEVATION: 6140 feet

LENGTH OF OBSERVATION: About 15 minutes Nov. 18. A few minutes at a time, other dates.

TIME OF OBSERVATION: 3:45 p.m. Nov. 18. Various times other dates.

OTHER OBSERVER: Victor M. Zerbi, Jr.
1118 Red Mountain Drive
Glenwood Springs, CO 81601

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Excellent - afternoon sun at observer's back.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT: Kowa TSN-2 spotting scope with zoom eyepiece. 10x binoculars.

DISTANCE FROM BIRD: 200 feet and up

NO PHOTOGRAPH

HABITAT: Gravel pit lakes in valley flat west and north of the Colorado River at
its confluence with the Eagle River. Mostly low vegetation, rather sparse. Clear
water with no emergent vegetation. Lakes on private property, not subject to
hunting. Smallest lake, where swan spent much of its time, is close to and
easily visible from eastbound I-70.BEHAVIOR: Always observed swimming except for a brief flight from one lake to
another. Fed by dipping its head in the water.DESCRIPTION: Big white swimming bird with a long neck. Canada Goose looked small in
comparison. Obviously a swan. It had a large black bill, the top profile of which
was nearly straight, leading up to a rather flat forehead; the high point of the
crown was toward the rear, well behind the eye. The black facial skin where it
met the eye was about the same width as the eye. The lower edge of the black
went from the eye to the base of the bill in an even gentle curve, much as is
shown for Trumpeter Swan in Figure 7 of Patten and Heindel. The lower mandible
was conspicuously pink, showing whether the mouth was open or closed. Seen from
the top the white feathering of the crown came forward to a straight-sided V,
an angle rather than a curve. The joint of the leg, which can be seen on a swimming
bird, is black; the rest of the leg under the water was probably black also.SIMILAR SPECIES: The only birds that could be confused with the subject bird are
other swans. The Mute Swan might be confused in flight, but the pink bill with
the black knob on top easily identifies any swan whose head can be seen well. The
Whooper Swan is similar to the Trumpeter except for extensive yellow at the
base of the bill. The Tundra Swan is the species most likely to be confused with
Trumpeter. Distinguishing features are the bill, which is relatively larger on
the Trumpeter. The top profile of the bill is concave upwards on the Tundra,
whereas on the observed bird it was almost straight. The Tundra Swan's crown is
rounded with the high point in the middle; the observed bird's crown was flat
with the high point at the rear. The black facial skin of the Tundra pinches to
less than the diameter of the eye; on the subject bird the skin and eye were
about the same width. The bottom margin of the black skin turns sharply down to
the base of the bill on the Tundra; on the subject bird the curve was gentler and
approximately even throughout, giving the impression that the eye is farther behind
the bill. Most Tundra Swans have a yellow loreal spot in the black skin; this was
lacking in the subject bird. On top of the head the white feathering goes from
eye to eye on the Tundra Swan in a curve which may be quite shallow; on the

Trumpeter it makes a V. This is the best mark of distinction, especially because on the subject bird it was a real angle and not just a sharp curve. The pink lower mandible observed on the subject bird is more characteristic of Trumpeter than of Tundra, although it may occur on the latter. I saw three Tundra Swans on the same lake on Nov. 12 at close range and saw no sign of pink, whereas I noticed the color right away on the Trumpeter. Since all of the characteristics favor Trumpeter, I feel certain that is the correct identity of the bird I saw, even though the characteristics are somewhat subjective and may be found on some Tundra Swans.

One characteristic of Trumpeter Swans mentioned in the books that I did not see is the position of the neck. Trumpeters are supposed to hold the base of the neck kinked back over the shoulders, then straight up from there. I never saw this swan in that position. Patten and Heindel (p. 315) place little significance on the neck position, and the three Tundra Swans I saw on Nov. 12, positively identified by yellow lore spots, all held their necks in the supposed Trumpeter position from time to time.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE WITH SWANS: Not extensive. As noted above I saw Tundra Swans a week before the Trumpeter, giving me something recent to compare the size and shape of the Trumpeter's bill with. In November '91 and '92 a few Tundra Swans were at Sweetwater Lake, about 12 miles as the swan flies northwest of Dotsero. One wore a collar, by which identification was confirmed. (It was banded in North Carolina!) A Trumpeter was on the Colorado River near Dotsero in February, 1993. It too had a collar by which identification was confirmed. In March of '93 five Trumpeters were at Sweetwater Lake for some time. I wasn't completely sure of their identity until they finally spoke out in a low, brassy voice.

BOOKS, ETC.: The NGS field guide was a starting point. Of more use was Patten and Heindel, "Identifying Trumpeter and Tundra Swans," Birding, Volume XXVI, No. 5, October, 1994, pp. 306-318. Since the bird was there for a week, I was able to return and check up on features that I wasn't quite sure of the first time. Also to compare illustrations with the bird itself.

This report was written from memory.

Date of written report: Dec. 1, 1997.

REPORTING OBSERVER: John S. (Jack) Merchant
Box 291
Eagle, CO 81631
(970) 328-6349

SIGNATURE: John S. Merchant