

MINNESOTA LOSES ONE OF ITS GREAT CONSERVATIONISTS, THE LEGENDARY

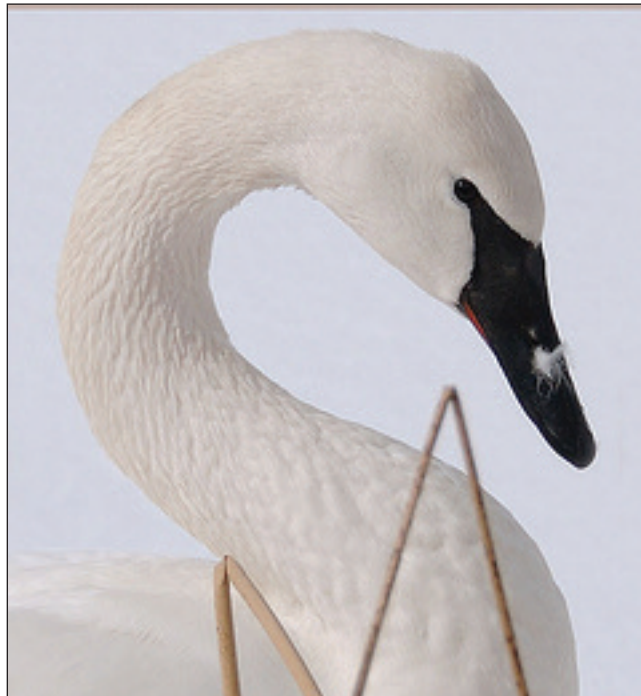
"Swan Lady of Monticello"

On Saturday, April 2, Minnesota lost one of its great wildlife conservationists - Sheila Lawrence. She was the legendary "Swan Lady of Monticello."

For nearly 25 years, Minnesotans have been privileged to watch the amazing recovery of the trumpeter swan across the state. From a population of only a few pairs in the 1980s, the number of trumpeter swans in Minnesota has increased to approximately 5,500 birds. One reason for this dramatic success story is a remarkable woman who lived on the banks of the Mississippi River at Monticello-Sheila Lawrence. Sheila and her husband Jim had a few pairs of trumpeter swans winter offshore from their home in the shallow waters of the Mississippi River for the first time in the winter of 1988-1989. Warm water discharges from the power plant at Monticello kept the water open all winter. Only 18 adults and 2 young swans called cygnets came that first year. Sheila was captivated by the beauty of the wild swans and took it upon herself to feed shelled corn to the swans and capture any injured swans so they could get the veterinary care that they needed so they could be returned to the wild.

The wintering swans showed up each fall in late November to early December and stayed in the shallow waters offshore from the Lawrence home until late March of each succeeding year. Within ten years, the number of wintering swans had increased to 360 birds, of which almost a third were cygnets. As Minnesota's swan population expanded across northern Minnesota, they still returned mainly to the Mississippi River near Monticello each winter where they would benefit from Sheila's watchful eye and daily feedings.

Carrol Henderson, Nongame Wildlife Program supervisor, has many fond memories of visiting Sheila and Jim each winter to watch the swans flying up and down the river and land gracefully prior to coming into the shallow water to eat at the feeders that Sheila had placed for them. Because of the high quality of the corn diet, Henderson believes that the swans would come through the winter in



such good condition that they probably returned to their northern nesting areas to lay larger clutches of eggs than they might have if they had survived on more sparse diets. "I think that Sheila single-handedly speeded up the recovery of this threatened species in Minnesota."

Sheila knew many of the swans individually because they were banded. In the winter of 2010, her favorite was "Number 9." This female was the offspring of one of the first pairs released by the Minnesota DNR near Detroit Lakes in the late 1980s. It was now 19 years old and was accompanied by a cygnet that it had raised the previous summer! She was a "supermom" that had been raising young for over 15 years. And Sheila could even tell you how many cygnets that Number 9 had raised in her lifetime.

By the late 1990s the trumpeter swan population seems to have reached "critical mass" in terms of spreading to new nesting areas and in successfully raising large broods of cygnets. It took a while to reach this phase of the recovery because trumpeter swans typically don't start nesting until they are four years old.

By the spring of 2010, Sheila had completed what was to be her last year of personally greeting the swans every morning throughout the winter. She had tallied a

total of 1348 adult swans and 310 cygnets coming to the river that year. What had begun as a hobby of putting a few bushels of corn in pails at the river each morning had grown to a mechanized operation that involved a grain wagon in the driveway and a long grain auger that moved the shelled corn all the way down to the river so the pails could more easily be filled and placed for the swans. Sheila and Jim were feeding from 1500 to 2000 pounds of corn per day! This not only took lots of dedication and backbreaking work to carry the pails of corn-it became expensive too.

Fortunately Sheila had lots of friends who made donations to help cover the cost of feeding the swans. Sheila was one brave and gutsy lady. Whenever a trumpeter swan showed up that was sick, carrying a fishing lure

hooked on its bill, or entangled in fishing line, she would walk right out into the river in her waders, jump on the swan, and then carry the struggling bird to shore so she could get it to a veterinarian for medical care.

The daily gathering of swans attracted so much attention that the City of Monticello purchased a lot adjacent to the Lawrence's home to create a small viewing park where swan lovers and photographers from throughout North America could gather even on winter's coldest days to marvel at the sight of more than 1500 swans gathering on the river each morning as Sheila walked among the swans to feed them on the rocky shores of the Mississippi.

Sheila contracted cancer last fall and became unable to feed the swans, so Jim took over the daily swan feeding duties on Sheila's behalf. He fed the birds throughout the winter. It is perhaps symbolic that Sheila survived until the swans returned north in spring from their winter haven at Monticello. Sheila will be missed. Over the past 23 years, you might say that Sheila-the Swan Lady of Monticello - earned her wings caring for, protecting, and helping restore one of Minnesota's most remarkable and beautiful birds - the Trumpeter Swan. - *Carrol Henderson*