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Trumpeter swans are beautiful birds with long, elegant necks and snow-white plumage. With an 8-foot wingspan and weighing over 25 pounds, they are our largest native waterfowl. Trumpeters require fresh, clean and spacious bodies of water. To get airborne, these massive birds need a really long runway – around 100 metres – along which they lumber, pounding the water with their wings and feet to gain speed for lift off. They breed on isolated wetlands in Alaska, Canada and the northwestern U.S., and spend the winter months on coastal and inland bodies of water that remain free of ice. In a matter of fact, Wolfe Lake resident, Donna Garland,

reported that as of last week, some of these big beauties are still lingering off her lakefront (photo).

Winter can be a great time to observe trumpeter swans. In spring and summer, mated pairs are hatching and raising their cygnets (offspring) in more secluded areas. In autumn, they are busy teaching the youngsters to fly, while single swans are focused on finding good eats in preparation for migration. Once winter settles in, the party gets started. Single birds begin mingling as they seek potential mates, and the parents are gathering, too, as if to show off their respective broods. It is a social time, with lots of interactive behaviours, like head bobbing. In places where lots of swans gather, this can offer an amazing spectacle.

Sadly, this remarkable sight was erased from the landscape when trumpeter swans were wiped out of Eastern Canada over 200 years ago. It began back in the 1600's, with the arrival of Europeans to North America. Using shotguns and traps, they grossly overhunted the swans to feed the fashion craze for fancy plumed hats and the feather collecting obsession, as well as for elegant writing quills, meat and powder puffs made from downy swan skin. The simultaneous slaughter of muskrats and beavers also contributed to the trumpeter's demise, as swans use the raised dens and dams for nesting habitat. The last wild trumpeter swan in Ontario was shot in 1886.

Fast forward a hundred years to the 1980's, when MNR biologist, Harry Lumsden, started a provincial program to reintroduce and reestablish the trumpeter swan to its former range. The Wye Marsh Nature Centre on Georgian Bay joined the crusade. Trumpeter eggs collected from Alberta were placed beneath mute swans – a related species -- and in 1990, a captive breeding pair of trumpeters named Big Guy and Lady Girl raised their first cygnet, dubbed Pig Pen. In 1993, Pig Pen and her mate became the first wild nesting pair of trumpeter swans in Wye Marsh in over two centuries! There were bumps along the way, but eventually, the trumpeter population increased to where the swans were dispersing naturally. By 2002, Ontario had a self-sustaining population which continues to grow each year. Similar restoration projects were successful in the U.S., where efforts returned the swans to much of their former range. In some western states, however, the swans are still struggling. Habitat loss is one of the biggest threats to trumpeters today, and they fail to thrive in human-dense areas.

If you see "seven swans a-swimming," and think they are trumpeters, please contact the good folks at Wye Marsh at wyemarsh.com or call 705-526-7809. Many trumpeters have leg bands and sport large yellow wing tags with a 3-digit code on them. Relay the number if possible, but any observations are valuable! Tips for discerning trumpeters from tundra and mute swans are available on the Trumpeter Swan Society website: trumpeterswansociety.org.

Photo credit: Donna Garland