

Wildlife Express!

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FISH & GAME

SWANS

Ugly Ducklings?

If you have heard the fairytale, *The Ugly Duckling*, then you know that swans are not ugly at all. Young swans might not be as pretty as their parents, but swans are some of the world's most beautiful birds. Seven different species of swan live around the world. All of them are white except the black swan. Most swans live in northern areas and do not like tropical places. Two kinds of swan live in North America. They are the tundra swan and the trumpeter swan, and we can see them both right here in Idaho!



part of the summer. Waterfowl lose all their flight feathers at once. This is called molting. In swans, the pen loses her flight feathers before the cob. The cob loses his flight feathers after the pen has re-grown hers. This way, a parent swan is always with the cygnets to protect them.

Swans are the largest members of the waterfowl family. In fact, the trumpeter swan is the largest waterfowl species in North America. Their wings are about seven feet across, and they weigh 23 pounds. That is pretty big for a bird. Swan-like birds have been around for a long time. Fossils of these swan ancestors have been found here in Idaho at Hagerman. It is estimated that they lived four million years ago. Idaho probably looked a lot different back then!

When fall arrives, swan families migrate together. A group of swans flying is called a wedge. If you see them, you can always tell the parents from the cygnets. The young swans will be gray and not white like their parents. This is why the swan in the fairytale thought he was an ugly duckling. It takes a young swan about two years to get its white feathers. Some swans fly short distances for migration. Others, like the tundra swan make a round-trip of almost 4,000 miles between their breeding and wintering areas.

Swans have long been a symbol of love. That is because they often mate for life. A mated pair stays together all year. The male is called a cob and the female is called a pen. When they are nesting, swan parents are fierce protectors of their nest, eggs and babies. Young swans are called cygnets. If a predator or unsuspecting human gets too close, watch out! The parent swans will hiss and try to hit the intruder with their wings to drive them away. Parent swans never fly off and leave their cygnets alone. One reason is because they cannot fly for



photo courtesy of Gregg Losinski

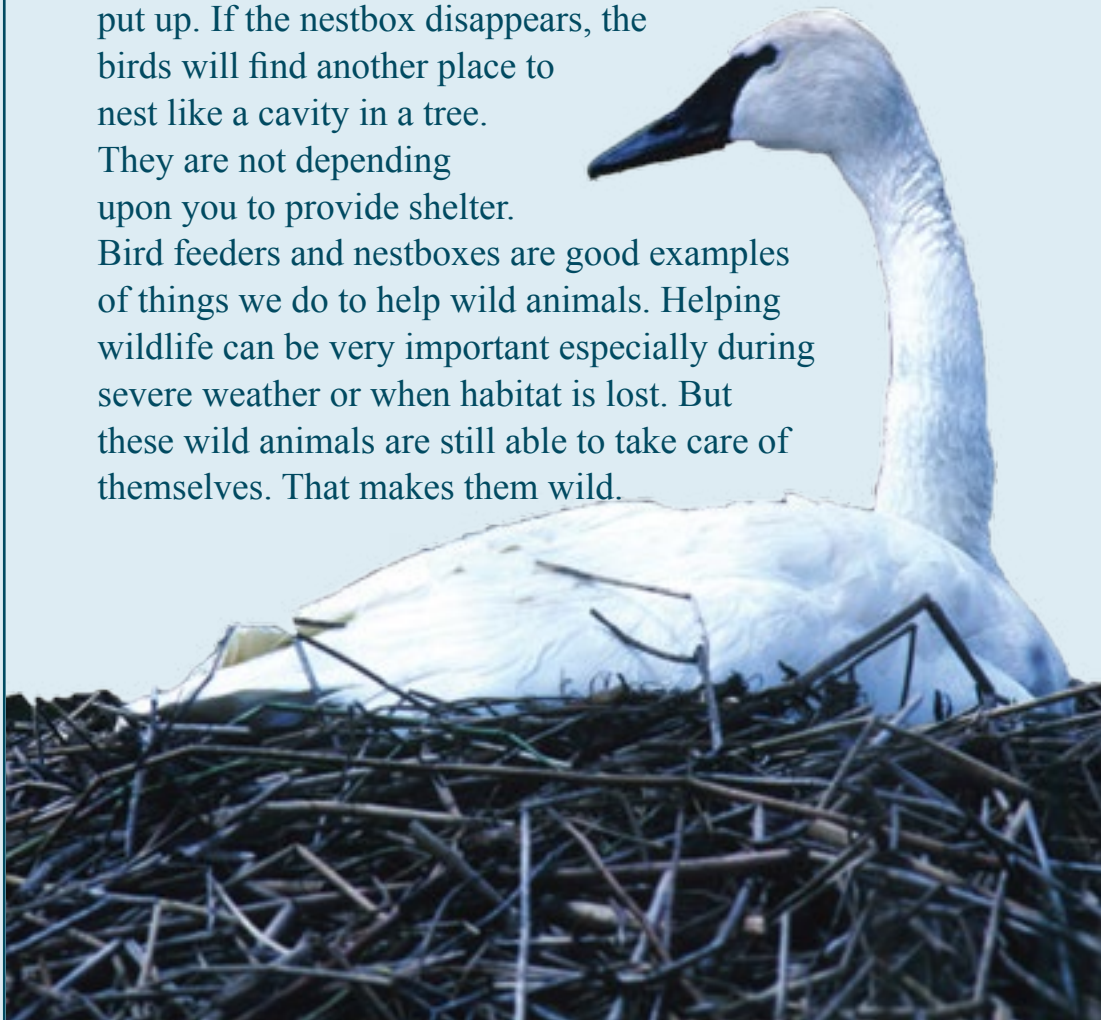
What's Wild?

Animals can usually be put in two large categories, wild and domestic. How can you tell the difference? In general, it has to do with whether or not the animal is around people. A wild animal is able to take care of itself with no help from people. It can find its own food, water, and shelter by itself. What about the birds that visit your feeders? You are giving them food, so are they wild? Yes, if your feeders become empty, the birds will simply move on and find food someplace else. They are not depending on you to provide food.

The same goes for a bird that uses a nestbox that a person put up. If the nestbox disappears, the birds will find another place to nest like a cavity in a tree.

They are not depending upon you to provide shelter.

Bird feeders and nestboxes are good examples of things we do to help wild animals. Helping wildlife can be very important especially during severe weather or when habitat is lost. But these wild animals are still able to take care of themselves. That makes them wild.



What's Domesticated?

A domesticated animal is an animal that depends upon people to survive. Think about your pet. You provide food, water, shelter, veterinary care, and love to your pet. For many pet owners, their pet is an important member of the family. Taking proper care of a pet is an important responsibility. If your pet had no one to take care of it, would it survive?

All domesticated animals came from wild animals at some time. Dogs were domesticated from wolves nearly 15,000 to 20,000 years ago. Cattle are thought to have been domesticated 6,000 to 7,000 years ago. Horses were domesticated more recently. Animals were domesticated to help people by providing food, protection, company, transportation, and help with heavy tasks. Imagine farmers several hundred years ago having to plow large fields without the help of a team of horses or oxen. Whew, what a job! Some ducks and geese were domesticated for food and their warm down feathers. They helped people survive in cold places.

Sometimes domesticated animals are found where we expect wild animals to live. When a domesticated animal is living in the wild, it is called a “feral” animal. Domesticated ducks, geese and swans can become feral. They live with wild waterfowl, usually in areas near people. If you have ever seen an odd-looking duck with a flock of mallards, it is usually a feral duck. These ducks act like wild ducks. They catch their own food and stay away from people.

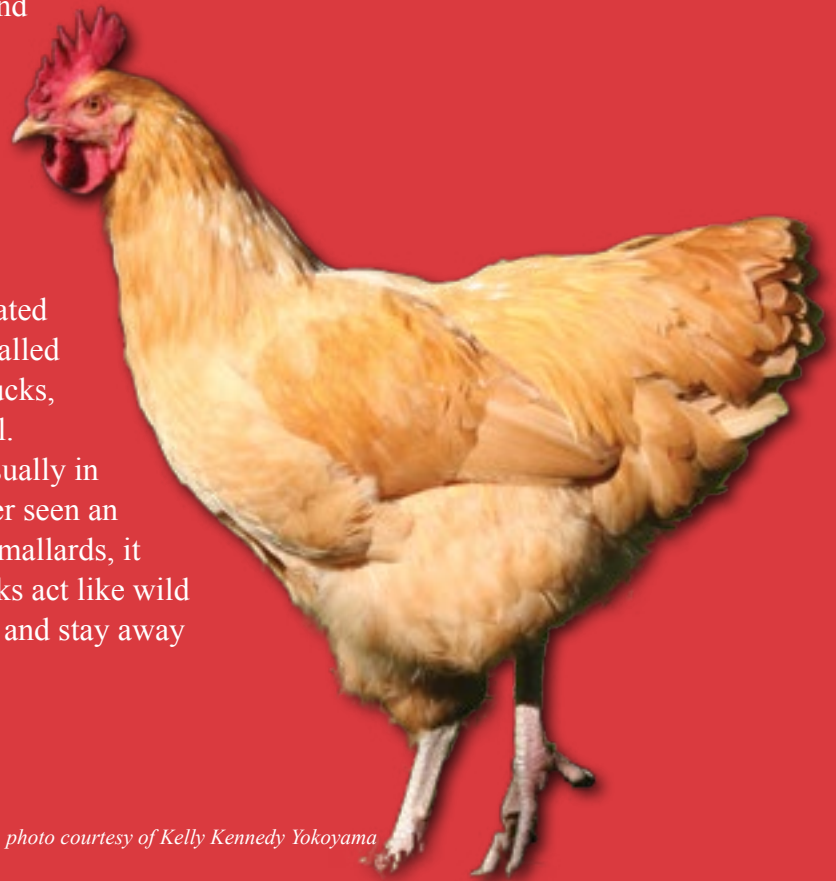


photo courtesy of Kelly Kennedy Yokoyama

The Waterfowl Family

Ducks, geese, and swans make up the waterfowl family. This large group of birds has 154 species living in aquatic habitats all over the world. They range in size from small ducks with wingspans of just over a foot to large swans with nearly seven-foot wingspans. All species have webbed feet and are expert swimmers. Male and female ducks can look quite different. This caused a lot of confusion for early naturalists who sometimes thought they were different species! The males and females of geese and swans tend to look alike.

Waterfowl eat plants and animals. Some species eat only plants or only animals while others eat both. This is possible because waterfowl bills have special structures called lamellae (lam-el-LEE).

The lamellae are toothed or comb-like structures that help waterfowl gather food. For example, the bill of a Canada goose is perfect for clipping grasses and eating seeds. A trumpeter swan has a bill that works well for gathering underwater plants. Some dabbling ducks, like mallards, strain food from the water. Diving ducks, like mergansers, have sharp serrations that help the duck catch and hold fish. Waterfowl bills also have a “nail” at the bill tip. This structure is used for both holding prey and removing seeds from plants.

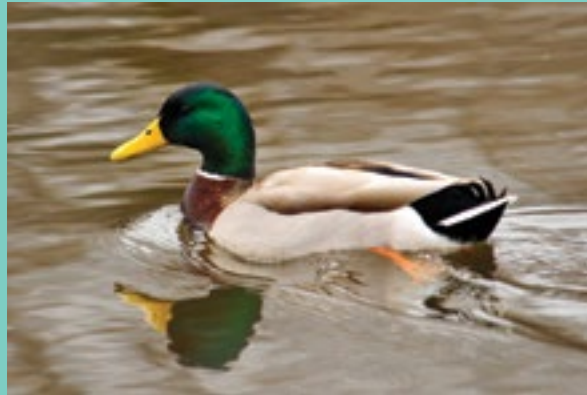
Waterfowl nest in many locations including holes in trees, cliffs, old eagle nests, or on the ground. Their nests are lined with down feathers that help

keep the eggs warm. The eggs tend to hatch at the same time. Baby waterfowl are called ducklings (ducks), cygnets (swans), or goslings (geese). As soon as they are dry, they leave the nest and follow their parents to nearby water. Unlike most baby birds, young waterfowl are able to walk, swim, and feed themselves only a few hours after hatching.

These kinds of birds are called “precocial” (pre-CO-shall). They can take care of themselves shortly after they are born, but still rely on their parents for warmth and protection from predators. Young waterfowl stay with their parents for most of the summer. Some family groups of swans and geese even migrate together in the fall.

By mid to late summer, adult waterfowl lose their tail

and flight feathers. This process is called molting. During this time, waterfowl cannot fly. It takes about a month for new feathers to grow. This happens just in time for fall migration. Waterfowl tend to migrate in large flocks. Some waterfowl migrate from northern Canada to spend the winter in Idaho. Other ducks that spend the summer in Idaho migrate to the southern United States and Mexico for the winter. No matter what the season, you are sure to see waterfowl in Idaho!



Mallard



Bufflehead



Wood Duck

photos courtesy of Mike Morrison



Trumpeter Swan



The trumpeter swan is the largest and rarest of North America's waterfowl. At one time, trumpeter swans were found across much of North America. By 1933, there were only 127 trumpeter swans in all of Canada and the United States. What happened?

As with the bison, humans caused the decline of this bird. Trumpeter swans were over-hunted for their meat and feathers. Down feathers were used to make warm mattresses and pillows. Large flight feathers were used to make quill pens for writing. Many people thought that trumpeter swan feathers made the best quill pens. The habitat swans needed was destroyed. Fortunately, many people realized that this amazing bird was vanishing, and they worked together to save it. Thanks to these efforts, more than 16,000 trumpeter swans live in the wild today.

We are lucky that Idaho is a great place for trumpeter swans. The part of Idaho that meets Montana and Wyoming is called the "tri-state" area. This is where Yellowstone National Park is located. It is a very important place for nesting and wintering trumpeter swans. Many ponds, small lakes and wetlands provide habitat for the swans to build their nests on top of floating plants, beaver lodges or muskrat mounds. These places also provide the food that the swans need. Adult swans use their big feet to stir the water around aquatic plants. This helps loosen the plants so the swans can more easily pull them up.

The area around Yellowstone is also important for swans in the winter. Even though this area gets very cold, some of the fast-flowing rivers do not freeze. Hot springs scattered around the region send warm water into rivers and streams, helping to prevent freezing. This open water gives the swans a place to find food. The cold does not bother the swans. They have a two-inch thick layer of down feathers. Down is one of the world's best insulators, so below-zero temperatures don't bother trumpeter swans.

If you visit the Yellowstone area, look for trumpeter swans. These large white birds are hard to miss. They have black legs, feet and bills. Adults have a thin pink line on their bill, called a grin line. You have to look very closely to see it. Trumpeter swan cygnets are gray with a pinkish bill. If you listen carefully, you might hear the trumpet-like honking sound that gives this species its name.

Tundra Swan



The tundra swan is the smaller of Idaho's two swan species. Their wings are a little over five feet across, and they weigh about 14 pounds. Like other swans, the tundra is white with black legs, feet and bill. If you get a good look, you might be able to see a small yellow spot just below a tundra swan's eyes. Tundra swans used to be called whistling swans because of the noise their wings make when they fly.

Tundra swans spend the summer in the Arctic raising their babies. The parent swans build a large cone-shaped nest on the ground. It is made of sticks and lined with grass and moss. Most nests are located near a pond. Once the eggs hatch, the parents can take their cygnets to the pond where they can find plenty of food and be safe from predators. Tundra swan cygnets grow very quickly. When they are 70 days old, they will weigh 28 times more than when they hatched. If you weighed eight pounds when you were born and you grew as fast as a cygnet, you would weigh 224 pounds in just over two months! The cygnets have to grow fast to be ready to migrate in the fall.

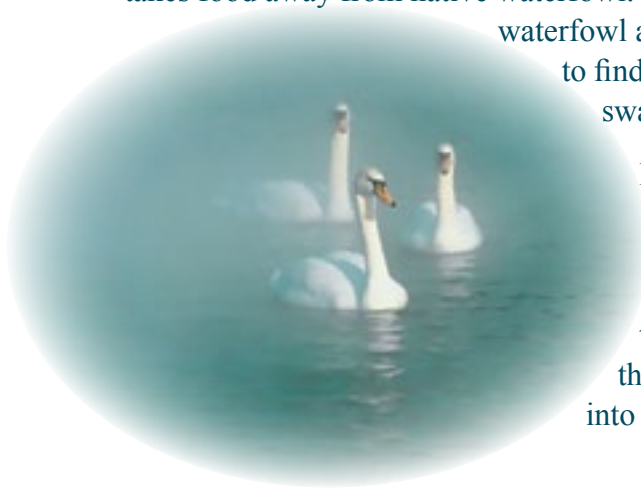
Tundra swans are winter visitors to Idaho. In the fall after the breeding season, they migrate south. Swan families migrate across Canada and parts of Idaho. They are headed to the Pacific coast to spend the winter. But some of them spend the winter in southern Idaho. They look for open water where they can rest and find food. Tundra swans eat aquatic plants, seeds, and grain. Sometimes swans will feed on fields where grain was harvested earlier in the fall.

Not Wanted!—Mute Swans

In some parts of Idaho, you might be able to see mute swans. These large beautiful swans are not native to North America. Because they are so pretty, mute swans were brought to the United States in the 1800s. They were displayed at parks, zoos and people's private homes. Some of them escaped and became feral. Today, mute swans can be found in many states. Unfortunately, these swans have caused a lot of problems. This is why they are considered an invasive species.



An invasive species is a plant or animal that is not native to an area. Invasive species damage habitats or crops, or can hurt the health of people. Mute swans are very aggressive birds. They chase native birds away from their habitats, so native birds can no longer nest or feed. In Maryland, mute swans have bothered wintering tundra swans. The number of tundra swans on the Chesapeake Bay in the winter has decreased by 30 percent since the 1970s. Mute swans also eat a lot of food. One mute swan can eat four to eight pounds of plants in one day. This takes food away from native waterfowl. It can also destroy a wetland. Native waterfowl and other animals will no longer be able to find the food they need. Sometimes, mute swans eat crop plants and this hurts people.



In their own countries in northern Europe and northern Asia, mute swans are not a problem. The swans, other wildlife, and the habitat have evolved together. Putting mute swans somewhere they do not belong turned a beautiful bird into an invasive species.

BE OUTSIDE: *Waterfowl Watch*



BE OUTSIDE
ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENTAL PLATITUDE

The holiday season is a great time to watch for waterfowl. Wintering birds join resident waterfowl on many Idaho lakes, rivers and ponds. Their interesting behaviors and colorful, boldly-marked feathers make them fun to watch. One of the advantages of watching waterfowl is their size. Most of them are large enough that they are fairly easy to observe. You can also observe waterfowl all year-round. In the spring watch for courtship behavior. Later in the season you can spot the young birds as they swim and feed with their parents. Fall brings the chance to observe waterfowl migration.

Waterfowl make great subjects for photographers and artists. If you are a young artist, you might want to enter the Junior Duck Stamp Contest. It is sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Check out their website for details at www.fws.gov/juniorduck.

Observing waterfowl is also very helpful if you are a waterfowl hunter. Being a good observer will help you identify waterfowl so you do not accidentally harvest the wrong kind of bird. Some waterfowl, such as swans, are protected. Unfortunately, they can be confused for snow geese----oops! If you spend time observing waterfowl before you go hunting, you will know how to properly identify the birds you see. Proper identification is also important when it comes to eating your harvest. Some ducks, like diving ducks, just don't taste very good! If you know what to look for, you will be able to bring home a duck that will make a tasty meal your whole family will enjoy.



Northern Shoveler



Mallard



Bufflehead



Trumpeter Swan



Wood Duck



Waterfowl Word Search

P E G Y N A J Y W S D E B H L
 Z R L N R W E L R D U T S L W
 J F E D I H O E P V C A P T O
 X D N C S L T D E V K R P J F
 Q U B W O E S I K L L G G T R
 T Z A U P C U O A A I I O L E
 M N T M G D I M G U N M O O T
 Y L U K Q R E A Q X G I S M A
 H R X E V L H S L L W T E X W
 T I K B L S R E H T A E F N G
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 E M T C B O V T A T A F Z B G
 V B X E L M T B G F T G G B U
 R T R W R B E A U T I F U L Y

Waterfowl Words

BEAUTIFUL LAMELLAE
 COB MIGRATE
 CYGNET MOLT
 DOWN PEN
 DUCK PRECOICIAL
 DUCKLING SWAN
 FEATHERS TRUMPETER
 FLY TUNDRA
 GOOSE WATER
 GOSLING WATERFOWL

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For more information, call or write: Wildlife Express, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, 600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2890.



Lead Writers: Vicky Runnoe Layout: Kelly Kennedy Yokoyama Contributors: Lori Adams, Adare Evans
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