

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

OF SWANS, ERRORS AND RARITIES

By Clive E. Goodwin

Back on January 27 a swan with an all-black bill appeared in Cobourg harbour. It looked like a fairly typical Trumpeter Swan, but as time passed and the bird stayed around I became progressively more unhappy with this identification. Trumpeters are the largest of the swans, and male swans are bigger and normally more aggressive than females. This bird was noticeably smaller than the Mutes, but it was quite aggressive, like a male. This sent me to my swan references, which led me to think that the bird was in fact a rather off-beat, large male Tundra Swan. I'd no sooner announced this to all and sundry when the wretched bird spent the next month proving me wrong. It started herding a Mute Swan around, most un-Tundra behaviour, was joined by a young Trumpeter from somewhere, and finally called loudly. That settled the matter: it was a Trumpeter Swan. Somehow, it didn't even look particularly small any more. How embarrassing!

Because veteran birders aren't supposed to make mistakes. They all do, of course, but normally with more circumspection. Which, if you're a new birder, or struggling with some of the trickier aspects of identification, will probably be both heartening and a little discouraging. Bird identification is certainly not an exact science, and some groups are particularly tricky. Swans are one of these, in this case because all the features we usually use to identify Trumpeters can occur in Tundras, and vice-versa. Many other species present similar problems – the Cackling/Canada Goose duo come to mind, and virtually all the larger gulls. Then for really rare birds, our sheer unfamiliarity with the species can make an error more likely.

For a database this presents some real problems. How do we know if a mistake has been made? We don't. Generally we rely on numbers to overwhelm the occasional error. In the case of swans, we have 154 records of 333 Trumpeter Swans, and 291 records of 2098 Tundras. Clearly, if my swan had been entered incorrectly, it wouldn't have seriously influenced any conclusions we might arrive at with regard to the status of swans in Northumberland.

But for rarer species it could indeed make a difference, and 'rare' can be a seasonal matter as well as an absolute one – a Scott's Oriole would be exceptional whenever it appeared, but a kingbird report in January would be unprecedented as well. I used to think that a distinctive bird like an Eastern Kingbird would be pretty much unmistakable, but over the years some surprising misidentifications have surfaced. It seems there's no such thing as an unmistakable bird. So we try to obtain supporting details on sightings of birds that are particularly unusual or difficult to identify. We can keep copies of that support with the record in the database, and it is available to allow later users to make their own assessments about it.

To be requested to provide some ‘documentation’ for your sighting can be quite daunting. So in the rest of this article I’m going to try to give some suggestions about how to go about it, and equally important, some pitfalls to avoid. A good photograph is often ideal, but not always possible, and some observers supply sketches, which can be useful too, but in the end a written account can often give important information that no pictures can provide.

There are rarity report forms that try to help this process by asking relevant questions. Details about circumstances of the sighting, your previous experience with the birds, the location, time, position of the sun and a host of other information can be requested. These ancillary details are easy to supply and helpful in giving the reader context, but in the end the core of any such report is always to answer the question: ‘Why did you conclude this bird was a Slaty-backed Mosquito Snatcher [or whatever]’, which brings you back to describing the bird. Sadly, the files are full of reports that are admirable in every respect – except that they fail to answer that key question. In fact, I once saw a three-page account [plus maps] that never mentioned what the bird looked like at all!

So how do you go about writing that description? Probably the most frequent mistake is simply to assure the reader that the bird was ‘just like the picture in the book’. A picture is a static object, and living birds only rarely look just like their pictures. By the same token, avoid simply listing the field guide characters as all seen and leaving it at that. Just as most birds don’t look ‘just like the picture’, there’s more to any bird than the characters given to identify it, and sometimes the guides fail to mention traits which can be very useful in identification, and which would help fill out your account. It’s best to try to say what you actually saw, in your own words, with as much detail as you can gather.

All that said, it doesn’t need to be in the least technical. For size, compare it to some bird you know well: ‘a little bigger than a robin’. While you don’t want to simply enumerate the characters listed in the guide, you could – and should - use those as a basis. It could even be in point form. Let’s try a description of my swan:

1. Clearly a swan, with all-white plumage, and an all-back bill; smaller than the adjacent Mutes.
2. Very aggressive, chasing the Mutes, and ‘herding’ one Mute, as though they were forming a pair. In my experience Trumpeters do dominate Mutes.
3. Bill all black except a pinkish line showing at times along the bill edge.
4. Black of the bill extending up in a narrow strip to join the eye.
5. Feathering above the bill extending down to form a shallow U where the bill met the forehead.
6. Top of the bill forming a fairly straight line from forehead to bill-tip, but close-up showing a slight concavity.
7. Call a loud raucous ‘trumpeting’ note, heard two or three times. I have heard this distinctive call from Trumpeters previously. It reminds me of a fog-horn! The Tundra call is higher pitched, more like a Canada Goose.

8. Characteristic Trumpeter resting position with neck partway along back not seen.

I identified the bird as an adult Trumpeter Swan based on the call, supported mainly by Points 2 and 3.

Point 1 sets the stage: it was a swan and its bill was black. Mute Swan bills are not black, so this species is eliminated at once. All the key identification characters as given in the guides are covered; some detract from the identification, some are rather ambiguous, but they all show the reader that these characters were considered. As the identification was based on the bird's voice, an attempt is made to give some more objective information as to how it sounded. This is one of those cases where a photograph wouldn't really have helped much. Finally, I say why I thought the bird was a Trumpeter Swan.

This is not an ideal description: it doesn't mention the shape of the head and body, the leg colour, and probably several other things [if we had chosen another species the account would have been completely different]. But I think it would probably convince a reader that I had seen a Trumpeter Swan, and if it didn't for some reason – well, that's what the account was for in the first place. And about the mistake – I'm always learning about birds, and I'll be careful about drawing conclusions from Trumpeter Swan sizes in future!