

POSSIBLE IMMATURE TRUMPETER SWAN IN FREMONT COUNTY.

2 Kim Eckers thinks
it's Whistling from
description

On December 18, 1977 Ross Silcock and Clifford Moles closely studied an immature swan at the Riverton Game Management Area, Fremont County, Iowa. It was an overcast day, with good to fair light, and the bird was studied from about 2.30 to 3.15 p.m. with a Balscope Sr telescope at about 300 yards.

The bird was swimming in an open area of about 20 acres within the largely frozen impoundment at the Riverton GMA where several thousand each of Snow Geese and Mallards were headquartered, although at the time of the observation the geese and most of the Mallards were absent, probably feeding.

Identification as a swan was made on the basis of large size relative to the few geese present and the long neck, along with the graceful movements of the latter. The orange-colored bill with its black distal third eliminated Mute Swan, as did the manner of carrying the neck and head upright rather than curved as is characteristic of the Mute Swan. The identification problem thus resolved itself into determining whether the bird was a Whistling Swan or a Trumpeter Swan.

My feeling is that at this time of year in western Iowa either species is as likely, the Whistling having been recorded a few times in the past, and the Trumpeter because of the location of three breeding colonies within about 350 miles of Fremont County, Iowa. These are at LaCreek NWR in South Dakota, Valentine NWR in north central Nebraska, and at Carver Lake in south-central Minnesota. In recent years immatures from the latter colony at least have departed in fall for unknown destinations.

According to Bellrose, the only reliable method for separating these two species in the field as immatures is leg color: pinkish or flesh-colored in the Whistling and mustard-yellow in the Trumpeter. Unfortunately this could not be determined as the bird was swimming and not enough of its legs could be seen. Bellrose also states that the Whistling Swan begins to lose its immature plumage in late fall and early winter, whereas the Trumpeter keeps its until spring or early summer. Thus an immature Whistling Swan in December should be showing some indication of paleness in its plumage, indeed it basically should appear whitish, with some dark shadowing. This in fact is the impression I have of immature Whistling Swans I have seen on many occasions at CBC time at Pea Island NWR in North Carolina. In contrast, the Riverton bird was very dark, with crown especially and the back of the neck almost chocolate-colored. In this context an interesting note was published in Nebraska Bird Review (36: 46) by Gail M. Shickley, who identified an immature swan seen in flight at Cody Park in Lincoln County, Nebraska as a Whistling on the basis of its plumage coloration, described as follows: "The dingy white of its plumage, washed with a slightly darker beige color on its back and upper wing surfaces," (emphasis mine). Furthermore, the bill was described as being "a dull pink for the full length....". These observations coincide with my conception of fall Whistling Swans being basically whitish, and add weight to the possibility that the Riverton bird was indeed a Trumpeter Swan. (The Riverton bird had a significant dark area on its bill, in contrast to the Lincoln County bird).

Unfortunately, because immature plumages can be rather variable, species identification cannot be made with certainty. Notwithstanding, the probabilities in this case appear to favor the occurrence of an immature Trumpeter Swan at Riverton, Fremont County, Iowa.

W. Ross Silcock.

December 29, 1977.