The first successful nesting in Illinois in 150 years marks the return of the trumpeter swan.

Heralding an Arrival

Story By Sheryl DeVore

As the sun hinted its rising, Eric Walters drove slowly across a bridge arching over a 35-acre wetland near an old railroad yard in Carroll County. Binoculars at the ready, Walters looked to the open water surrounded by aquatic vegetation near the town of Savanna. One swan was swimming while another sat nearby atop an abandoned muskrat lodge. The swan on the lodge lifted her wings above the nest and revealed…four eggs.

She stood up, gently turned the eggs with her bill, and then settled back down on the lodge. Confirmed! May 29, 2006. Those four eggs meant the swan was a confirmed nester in the state. This wasn't just any swan. It was *Cygnus buccinator*, a trumpeter swan, which hadn't bred in Illinois for at least 150 years.

"It was not lost on me," said Walters, "that it was sunrise, and this was the dawning of a new era for the trumpeter swan in Illinois." Indeed, the pair of trumpeter swans returned and successfully reared young at the same wetland in 2007, while a second pair of trumpeter swans produced five young on a nearby marsh.

"One of the most inspiring conservation success stories in recent years may be that of the trumpeter swan," said Southern Illinois University avian researcher Dana Varner.

The trumpeter swan is the largest of all North American waterfowl and the largest swan in the world. Its wings, adorned with snowy white feathers, spread up to 8 feet wide (compared with the 3.5-foot wide wing spread of the snow goose). A deep-black bill contrasts with its white feathers. The swan's long neck, used to dip into the water to retrieve aquatic delicacies, sometimes get stained with a rusty color if iron is in the water. It gets its name from the brassy trumpet-like sound given when alarmed or to attract a mate and guard its territory.

Historically, the trumpeter swan, a migratory species, occurred across

This trumpeter swan pair, with two chicks swimming in a Carroll County wetland, represent the beginning of a new era in Illinois. The swans began nesting in Illinois in 2006 after a 150-year absence. (Photo courtesy Eric Walters.)

An adult trumpeter swan pair guards its chicks at the same Carroll County site where it returned to nest in 2007. (Photo courtesy Barbara and Lawrence Casey.)

much of the northern United States and Canada. During pre-settlement times, the trumpeter swan was an uncommon but regular breeder in backwater sloughs and marshes along Illinois' larger river valleys. Pairs often chose old muskrat lodges, and the female attached cattail stalks to the lodges to create a bed for her cygnets. The trumpeter swans likely began migrating to their Illinois breeding grounds in March, and left by November for warmer climes.

As the swan's wetland habitat got filled in and the demand grew for its meat, eggs and feathers (to adorn European ladies' hats), the population plummeted. By the end of the 19th century, this species was thought to have become extirpated from the United States.

But after a wild population of breeding swans was discovered in Alaska in the 1950s, conservation efforts to return them to the Midwest and other parts of the country began. In the 1980s, Wisconsin, Ohio and Michigan started rearing young swans in captivity and releasing them at select wetlands, hoping adults would locate one another and nest. Brookfield and Lincoln Park zoos in Illinois next joined the crusade. Cygnets bred there were released in states near Illinois, including Iowa. By the early 21st century, Wisconsin had at least 96 pairs of trumpeter swans breeding in the wild. It was about time this bird decided to set up shop in Illinois.

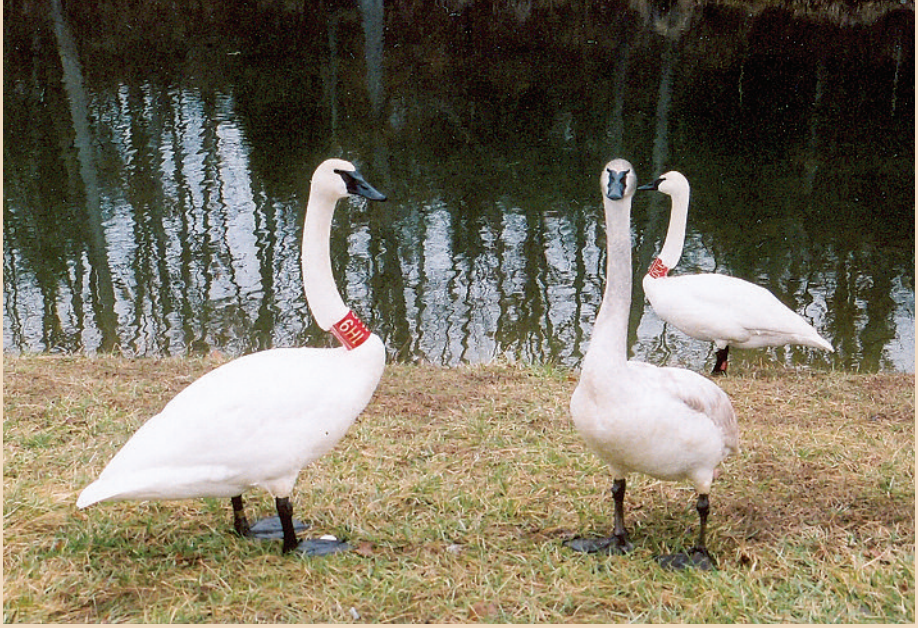
And well they should, according to Dan Wenny, an avian biologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey. Though some controversy swirls about whether to reintroduce this species to certain

(Photo courtesy Barbara and Lawrence Casey.)

Trumpeter swans lay 4-6 eggs, and cygnets hatch after 33-37 days of incubation. As adults, these swans can have an 8-foot wing span.

Besides the trumpeter swan, two other swan species occur in Illinois. The tundra swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) has not historically nested in Illinois, but uses the rivers and lakes during migration. Tundra swans spend winters on the East Coast and nest in Canada and the arctic. The species is smaller than the trumpeter and the adult has a yellow marking in front of its eyes.

The mute swan (*Cygnus olor)* is an introduced species, native to Eurasia. The adult has an orange bill with bulbous black knob at the base of the bill.



Neck collars are used to track the migratory patterns of captive-bred swans. (Photo courtesy Joan Bade.)

parts of the Midwest, Wenny is quick to say, "This bird belongs in Illinois. It is part of our historical avifauna."

Birders and state officials had been seeing signs for the past several years that the trumpeter swan might begin to nest in Illinois again. But no potential pairs produced young until that late May date in 2006. Both swans were banded, indicating one was born in captivity in 2003 and the other in 2004,

A trumpeter swan on her nest in Carroll County in 2006. Hopefully, scenes like this will become more common in Illinois.

(Photo courtesy Eric Walters.)

and both were released in eastern Iowa. All four eggs hatched into fluffy balls of gray. In September, only one young swan had survived and by October, the family was gone for the winter.

The pair returned to the same site in 2007, tidied their nest and produced four more young. INHS biologist Randy Nÿboer discovered a second pair of trumpeter swans that produced five cygnets in a nearby marsh.

"Only one of the pair had a collar," said Nÿboer, who finds it exciting that a swan born in the wild had mated with one that had been released.

Trumpeter swans will need more than just good breeding habitat and reintroduction programs to survive in the wild. First, if the birds choose not to migrate, which well they might, they may not find enough food to eat in winter. Secondly, though lead shot has been banned, much of it still remains lodged at the bottom of wetlands where the swans feed.

"Lead poisoning looms as the single greatest threat to the reestablishment to trumpeter swans in the Midwest," said Wisconsin avian ecologist Sumner Matteson.

Nÿboer says one of the only pair of trumpeters released in Illinois died from lead poisoning from fishing sinkers. The other swan was removed and taken to Iowa. "We have to be very careful about where we release these birds," he said.

Their survival may be tenuous, but three successful nests in Illinois in the past two years—after a 150-year absence—hopefully points to better days ahead for trumpeter swans in Illinois.

Sheryl DeVore is chief editor of the Meadowlark, published by the Illinois Ornithological Society and author of three books including "Birds of Illinois."