

Tundra Bombers

written by DAVID HART

Large and abundant, tundra swans provide an excellent game species for North Carolina hunters.



Two hundred, maybe 300 tundra swans rested on the calm waters of Currituck Sound a half-mile away. Jim Clark, his friend Alton Whitehurst and I leaned hard on the railing of Clark's pine-tree-covered stake blind 2 miles away from the boat dock, wondering if the big white birds would get up today. It was already 11 a.m., and Clark, a waterfowl guide from Knott's Island, expected the morning flight to be well under way. But things don't always go the way a hunter wants.

The raft of birds had risen in unison three times already. The rush of wings and the cacophony of swan talk offered a glimmer of hope that the morning would turn from a bird-watching event into an actual hunt. But each time, the birds swirled back down onto the water in a single strand of white, as if they were taunting the three men perched in the blind off in the distance.

Swans aren't particularly difficult birds to hunt. Find a place they've been using regularly, set out a dozen or so decoys and wait. Thanks to a limited number of permits and a one-bird-per-season bag limit, tundras don't spend the winter dodging steel shot like geese might. They can be decoy-shy toward the end of the season, particularly around public hunting areas and other places that get a fair amount of pressure from duck and goose hunters, but Clark says that sooner or later, some birds that haven't seen a decoy all year will wander by. For as long as he's been taking swan hunters and targeting these big birds himself, Clark has averaged nearly 100 percent success.



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A flock of tundra swans passes over a duck hunter tending to decoys in the Pamlico Sound.



“Everybody’s gotten an opportunity, at least. It’s hard to miss such a big bird,” Clark says, “but I’ve seen a few people do it.””

A commercial fishing boat plowed through the water a mile away, its course dead-set on the swans. We got our break. When the small craft neared the swans, they rose like a single, screaming cloud of white,

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then split into smaller groups. Singles, pairs and small flocks passed within 200 yards of the blind, a few birds swung closer, but none cupped their wings to drop in among the decoys. Most never gave us so much as a passing glance. Clark and Whitehurst, both accomplished swan hunters, cupped their hands over their mouths and cried out with a series of “whoo-whoo”s and “look-look-look-look”s, fine imitations of the real thing.

There are no commercially available calls for swans, but that hasn’t stopped Clark from pulling in distant birds. He simply cups his hand over the side of his mouth and belts out a series of yells that sounds strikingly similar to the real thing. It’s hard on the throat, he admits, but until somebody starts selling a hand-held call, it will have to do. Spend some time in swan country, and you can’t miss the unmistakable call of these grand birds. It’s not hard to imitate at all.

Finally, a lone adult tundra swan skimmed low over the water and then rose up as it approached the decoys gently bobbing in the water. With a single shot, Clark’s swan season was over.

“Once they start heading toward your decoys, you really don’t need to call anymore. If they want to come in, they’ll come in,” he says.

Dinner Guests

Although tundras feed primarily on aquatic vegetation, their feeding habits have been shifting to a more terrestrial diet. Most hunters have followed, says Dennis Luszc, migratory bird coordinator for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. Clark, however, has a dozen pole blinds in and around Currituck Sound where he guides duck hunters, so he takes advantage of the situation and hunts swans out of those

Getting a Permit

Swan permits are available through a lottery system. The application deadline is Oct. 1, so you’ll have to wait until this summer if you want to apply for this unique hunt. The application fee is \$10, and your chances of getting drawn are 99 percent, according to Wildlife Commission statistics. For more information, visit the commission’s Web site at www.ncwildlife.org, or call (800) 675-0263.



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same blinds. Grain fields are excellent places to set out a decoy spread, and those wheat, corn and bean fields that were once the domain of Canada geese and snow geese are now a standard feeding spot for swans, as well. However, swans tend to do less damage to a winter wheat or barley field than a huge flock of snows or a band of Canadas. Waterfowl biologist Joe Fuller says there is a wide range of emotions when it comes to swans.

“One farmer hates them while another down the road doesn’t see them as a concern. It really depends on who you talk to. In some cases, swans or geese that do some light grazing on winter wheat can actually increase the crop’s productivity. The most damage is done when the soil is wet and the birds actually pull the entire plant out of the ground,” he says.

Although tundra swans were an important part of North Carolina’s long, rich history of waterfowl hunting, the season was put on hold in the 1930s. Like so many other types of waterfowl, swan numbers dipped precariously, due largely to unregulated hunting. Conservation measures, along with dedicated wildlife officers intent on enforcing the strict laws, helped restore tundra swan numbers to where they are now.

“North Carolina has the highest population of wintering tundra swans along the Atlantic Flyway by far, and the population has been steadily increasing for about 40 years,” Fuller says. “We have 70- to 80 thousand, which is about 75 percent

Though their populations are healthy today, swan numbers dove dramatically in the early 1900s—a result of unregulated hunting.

of the total Atlantic Flyway swan population. Virginia is the only other state in the east that has a swan season, but we have many more birds than they do, so we can offer a lot more permits.”

In Season

A limited season was reopened in 1984, a season that created only a slight murmur in the waterfowl hunting community. The Wildlife Commission offered 1,000 permits that season, good for one bird per person per season. But data collected by the Wildlife Commission showed a harvest of only about 200 birds. The number of permits went up dramatically after that, to 6,000, and stayed there for 11 years (with the exception of the 1989 season, which had 5,500 permits), until waterfowl biologists settled on an annual allotment of 5,000 permits. Despite the steady growth in the number of wintering swans in North Carolina, the total harvest has averaged less than half the number of permits available. That’s not because these birds are so difficult to hunt, says Clark. Likely, it has more to do with being in the right place at the right time, or simply finding a good place to hunt tundras.

Food for Thought

Tundra swans are the largest native North American waterfowl in the Atlantic Flyway, with a wingspan of nearly 7 feet and a body that can weigh as much as 17 pounds. The first question a hunter might ask is this: What do I do with a bird that big? Forget the Christmas goose, and leave the turkey for those who prefer to gather their holiday feast at the grocery store. How about the Christmas or Thanksgiving swan? Or do as Jim Clark often does: He cooks his swan for large gatherings of friends or family.

Swans are similar to other waterfowl in both the appearance of the meat and the flavor, although Clark says they are a bit stronger than a Canada goose. That may not sound appealing to hunters with a taste for quail and other upland birds, but he and many other waterfowlers prefer the darker, richer meat of swans, ducks and geese.

“I’ll cook swans just like I cook a duck or a goose,” he says. “I normally skin them, and I’ll either grill them or bake them in the oven. I also marinate them with a teriyaki sauce.”



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“You can take any goose decoy and paint it white, and it will work for swans. But because swans are quite a bit larger than geese, it’s a good idea to use magnum decoys, which are bigger than a standard, life-size goose decoy,” Clark says. “Really, even that doesn’t seem to matter. If I’m hunting ducks and swans, I’ll mix a half-dozen swan decoys in with the duck decoys. That’s all you really need. If I’m going after only swans, I might use as many as two dozen, but it really doesn’t take that many.”

The hard part, as with so many other types of hunting, is simply finding a place to go. Farmers are learning that swans—like geese, ducks, deer and turkeys—are a cash crop, and hunters are often willing to pay a modest fee to hunt on private property. Knock on enough doors, and you’ll eventually find a farmer fed up with these big, white birds. You might even get a chance to set out a few decoys without paying a fee.



The transmitter attached around the swan's neck allows researchers to monitor the birds' migration routes with satellite tracking. Below, a wildlife biologist attaches a band around a swan's leg.



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"It's getting harder to find a place to hunt swans without paying anymore, but there are a few farmers out there that will let you hunt," says David Denton, a hunter safety coordinator for the Wildlife Commission and veteran swan hunter. "A lot of farms are leased, but there are some farmers who will charge you only a daily fee of \$25 or so. That's not a bad deal when you think about it."

Denton hunts fields exclusively and has often volunteered to guide for friends and associates who have drawn swan permits. He and his hunting partners have had great success, and Denton has even pulled

in birds close enough for hunters to get shots with archery equipment.

"I'll use as many as 200 decoys if I want to get them real close, but most of the time I'll use two or three dozen. I just use snow goose decoys, and I have some swan silhouettes that I made. I'll mix those in with the goose decoys," he says. "They decoy pretty easy, but they do seem to be getting smarter every year."

Swans in Space

In 1999, the Wildlife Commission initiated a five-year study to learn more about the life habits of these intriguing birds. Little

is known about tundra swans, so biologists from North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania—along with researchers from the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology—are working together to determine migration routes, primary breeding areas, annual survival rates and local wintering-ground movements. A variety of methods are being used to learn more about swans, but the most valuable tools are transmitters that send signals to a satellite orbiting the earth.

Other research tools include radio transmitters, which have a range of about 2 miles,

that allow biologists to monitor local swan movements. Also, neck collars are attached that are visible from several hundred yards away through binoculars or spotting scopes. Luszcz and his colleagues attached 400 neck collars, 80 radio transmitters and 10 satellite transmitters on swans between 2000 and 2002 as part of the five-year study. Biologists fitted an additional 10 swans with satellite transmitters last winter, as well.

"The good thing about the satellite transmitters is that we don't have to be out there actually tracking the birds with hand-held transmitters or looking for them with binoc-

ulars and spotting scopes. Both of those are very time-consuming. The satellite transmitters allow us to keep tabs on the birds while we are doing other things," Fuller says.

Although the study is still under way, biologists are already getting a better idea of tundra swan migration routes and breeding areas. Cornell University researchers have found that, so far, there is no correlation between where the birds spend their winters and where they choose to nest. In other words, swans that nest in Alaska are just as likely to end up in North Carolina as they are in Maryland or even Pennsylvania. Most of the data

is incomplete, however, and Fuller and other biologists are still waiting to gather more before they reach conclusions and adjust hunting seasons and bag limits, if necessary.

One thing is certain. There will always be swans in North Carolina. And as long as biologists are learning more about these graceful birds and working hard to maintain a healthy population of them, hunters like Clark and Denton will be sitting in wind-blown pole blinds or lying on frozen mud each winter with a swan tag in their wallet, a shotgun in their hands and that eternal hope that all waterfowl hunters carry with them. ☒