

Winter White... by Cindy Williams, Photos by Cindy Williams

In the depths of winter, with an occasional mantle of snow on the ground, there are very few mammals who find their way to the Center – only the odd Gray Squirrel or Virginia Opossum who manage to wind up on the wrong side of an interaction with humans. Songbirds are fleeting as well, so to speak, though they do manage to visit us from time to time when a backyard birder or an unlucky driver brings them to recoup from an illness or injury. Raptors and overwintering amphibians and reptiles usually account for most of our efforts during this time of year. But we do have three unique winter guests who have shown up at roughly the same time and seem to be quite apropos considering the weather outside. They are all very different but very much “birds of a feather”. The “birds” would be water birds, and the “feather” would be white. Let me introduce you to three of our more unusual winter guests and their pale plumages; the Snow Goose, the Trumpeter Swan, and the American White Pelican. Unfortunately they also have something else in common – we have no definitive diagnosis for any of them. Not uncommon in the wildlife rehabilitation world.

The Snow Goose is the smallest and most ubiquitous of the three, making its yearly trek from summer to winter quarters in great numbers and accompanied by an eagle population that feeds on the weakest of the flock. They spend their summers in the northernmost reaches of the United States (Alaska, actually), Canada, Greenland, and even the tip of Siberia. During the cold winter months they find their way to the warmer parts of North America including southwest British Columbia and as far south as Texas and Mexico.

Snow Geese have two very different looks, or plumage morphs – white (or snow) morph, and gray/blue (or blue) morphs. We see primarily white morph Snow Geese in this area, which are mostly white with black tips on their wings. You can see them by the thousands each year in areas like Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge near Mound City, MO, about an hour and a half north of Kansas City. Twice a year they gather in this area during their migration and put on quite a show – noisy and magnificent. We don't know what brought our malingerer to the front yard of a kind person in Concordia, but we are very thankful they made the trek from there to get him the help he needs at Lakeside. He has no apparent injuries and his legs seem to be working, but he cannot hold himself upright and is not eating. Supportive care and doses of steroids (for potential injury/swelling) and antibiotics (for potential infection) are the best course of action for this guy.

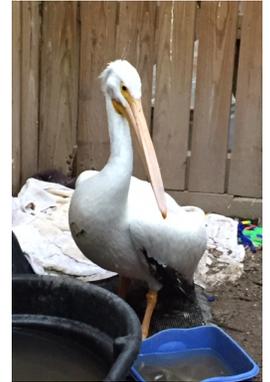
The Trumpeter Swan also came a long way to receive specialized care - she comes to us from Linneus, Mo, population 278 people and at least one sickly swan. It was originally suspected that she was shot – the left side of her face had small puncture wounds, her ear was bruised and her mouth was bloody. But x-rays performed by our local veterinarian/friend of wildlife, Dr. Exline, showed no shot present. She was treated for lice (ugh) and started on medication to ward off infection. She has not shown much interest in eating on her own so she has to be tubed 3 times/day which is quite an ordeal. It takes at least 3 people – one to sit on her and control her body and neck, one to hold open her mouth and keep her tongue out of the way, and another to deliver the food and medicine. We use Exact, a formula created specifically for birds, which can be delivered through a syringe and tube. She seems to be getting stronger and stronger (which will make



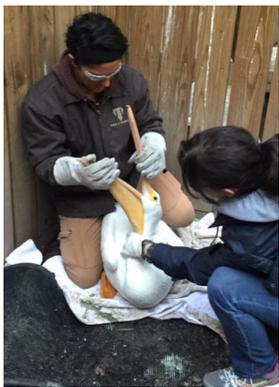
feeding harder and harder – let's hope she starts eating soon), but it's unclear what her prognosis will be. Every day she gets some swim time, and while she's preening herself in the tub she often lets out some honks that can be heard throughout the rehab area. She's really a magnificent creature – all white with a distinctive black bill. They are the heaviest North American native bird, and among the heaviest of all the flighted birds in the world.

There are three known North American populations of Trumpeter Swans – Pacific-Coast (northwestern Canada and Alaska), Rocky Mountain, and Interior (Great Lakes and Upper Midwest). Most of the breeding pairs known today are in Alaska. They winter in the southern parts of Canada and the US, possibly as far south as Texas. They were highly endangered at one time, with fewer than 70 wild swans known to exist in 1933, and were believed to be on the brink of extinction before a new population was discovered in Alaska. Wildlife officials and the Trumpeter Swan Society began a reintroduction which resulted in a North American population of over 46,000 swans by 2010. A true success story.

The American White Pelican needs no (re)introduction! Pelicans have been around for at least 30 million years (according to fossil records) and the American White had a brief decline in the middle of the twentieth century with the widespread use of DDT, but they rebounded nicely in the 80's and numbered more than 100,000 at that time. These birds rival the Trumpeter Swan in weight, but they've got them beat in the beak department. Their beaks are easily their most distinctive feature. Nearly a foot and a half long, their lower beak expands to become a large pouch when they are fishing. American White Pelicans, unlike their Brown counterparts, prefer the inland parts of North America for breeding. Their summer grounds range from northern Canada to the far northern parts of the US. They tend to winter along the Pacific and Gulf coasts though, as well as along the Mississippi River as far north as St. Louis. They are not considered coastal, however, preferring lakes, estuaries and rivers to open seashores.



Our friend at the Center came to us from Big Lake, Missouri, which is not far from the aforementioned Squaw Creek. Some folks had been watching him for a few weeks and noticed his wing was dragging a bit. We could find no breaks or dislocations, but his wing is definitely not 100% and perhaps never will be. The last pelican we had was very comfortable around people and seemed to enjoy our company from the start. This guy was extremely combative when he first arrived – two people wearing protective eye gear were required to shove fish down his extremely lengthy gullet in order to feed him. After a few weeks, however, he too has become a “people pelican”. I had the privilege of feeding him recently, and although he was pretty picky about the placement of the fish in his mouth, he was happy to be hand fed and even seemed to enjoy physical contact (something we would never encourage with an animal that is being returned to the wild). He will get supportive care (this guy can really go through the fish) and will be sent up to join his pelican friends in a sanctuary near Omaha. It's certainly not



ideal that he will unlikely be able to cruise the skies looking like the prehistoric creature that he is, but at least he should be able to continue a relatively natural existence with others of his kind.

I hope you're managing to keep warm and enjoy the beautiful season that brings these migratory visitors through our area, either for a brief stop on their way to warmer climates or a longer winter sojourn. Keep your eyes to the skies and the lakes this spring and

you may just see other examples of these beautiful winter white birds heading back to their breeding areas to begin the next generation.