Minnesota supports the largest population of the majestic Trumpeter Swan south of Alaska and Canada.

**State/Province** | % of Global Population
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Alaska | 55
Rocky Mountain population of Yukon, western British Columbia, Alberta and Northwest Territories | 19
Minnesota and western Ontario (approximately 12% in Minnesota) | 13
Pacific Coast population of Yukon and northwest British Columbia | 3
Wisconsin | 2
14 other states and provinces | 8

**Current Distribution:** There are three geographically recognized populations of Trumpeter Swans in North America: the Pacific Coast population, the Rocky Mountain population and the Interior population.

The heart of the swan’s Minnesota range is in the central region of the state, with pairs gradually expanding northeast, south and west. During the winter, birds that comprise the Interior population of Trumpeter Swans move to areas that are ice-free and provide sufficient food. In Minnesota, the largest concentration of wintering swans can be found on the Mississippi River at Monticello. A smaller number also winter along the Fish Hook River in Park Rapids and in other scattered locations.

**Description:** All swans are unmistakable in their appearance. Graceful in flight and on the water, the adults white plumage, long neck and large size are easy field characteristics. The challenge is distinguishing the three different species that occur in Minnesota. During the breeding season, all swans seen in Minnesota are Trumpeter Swans. The only exception is the occasional Mute Swan. Officially classified as an exotic species in the state, the Mute Swan is easily identified by its orange bill with a black knob at its base. Mute swans are not migratory so they may be present any time of year.

Migrating Tundra Swans, on the other hand, can be difficult to distinguish from resident Trumpeter Swans during their spring and fall migration through Minnesota. Even skilled field ornithologists can be challenged by their identification unless the birds are side-by-side. The Tundra Swan is smaller and usually displays a small, yellow spot at the base of the bill. The bill is also smaller and the upper ridge is a bit concave compared to that of the Trumpeter. When viewed from the front, the base of the Trumpeter’s bill is v-shaped between the eyes compared to a u-shape on the Tundra. Despite these challenges, the call of the Trumpeter Swan is distinct and upon first hearing it, the listener will understand why the bird is called a “Trumpeter.” Its deep, rich honking call is horn-like in resonance, unlike the higher, raspy call of the Tundra Swan that sounds more similar to a goose.

**Habitat:** The Trumpeter Swan is primarily an inhabitant of marshes and shallow lakes although the shallow bays of large lakes also may be used. Because vegetation is a large component of its diet, a rich and diverse community of aquatic plants is critical, including pondweeds, water lilies and bulrush. Fish and fish eggs are also consumed along with
other small aquatic animals such as mussels and crayfish. The swan’s large size requires an area of open water at least 30 feet long to allow a running start for getting airborne. Nests are usually close to shore and constructed on muskrat or beaver homes, beaver dams or floating mats of vegetation.

**Threats/Status:** Prior to the mid-1800s, the Trumpeter Swan was a regular breeding species in Minnesota’s native prairie and prairie-forest border. Elsewhere, its historical range stretched from the Bering Sea, across Canada and south into Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. But, as settlement moved westward, this large conspicuous bird was an easy target for the settlers’ rifles. By the early 1890s the species was extirpated from the state.

Efforts to reintroduce Trumpeter Swans to Minnesota were begun by the Three Rivers Park District in 1966 and later expanded in the early 1980s by federal, state and tribal resource agencies, the Trumpeter Swan Society, and the University of Minnesota. Similar efforts were also initiated by other states and provinces. Minnesota’s initial goal of establishing 15 breeding pairs has now been exceeded by orders of magnitude. A 2010 continental survey of Trumpeter Swans documented 6,070 adults in Minnesota and western Ontario, nearly 5,500 of which were present in Minnesota.

Although a breeding population is well-established in the state, threats remain. Today the largest cause of mortality is from lead poisoning caused by ingesting lead shot and lead sinkers. Swans swallow these items when they forage for aquatic vegetation rooted in the sediments or search for grit to aid their digestion. Ingesting as few as 3–4 lead shot pellets can cause death. Lead shot is no longer allowed for waterfowl hunting, but decades of use has resulted in the accumulation of pellets on the sediments of popular hunting marshes. Lead fishing sinkers are still in common use today. Other threats include collisions with power lines, recreational disturbance on nesting lakes and vandalism or illegal shooting.

**Conservation:** Protection of the swan’s nesting habitat, wetlands and shallow lakes with abundant aquatic vegetation, is the most critical conservation effort. Continued education about the potential hazards of lead fishing sinkers is also important.

**Did You Know?** The largest of North America’s waterfowl, weighing up to 28 pounds, the Trumpeter Swan’s largest feathers were considered the best for quill pens. The birds pair up when they are three to four years old and generally mate for life, many living over 24 years in the wild. Some males that lose their mates never mate again.