
Sighting of apparent Whooper Swan on Vancouver Island, British Columbia

Dianne Shuttleworth

584 Nassau Crescent, Qualicum Beach, B.C. V9K 1C6; email: diannesh@telus.net

Abstract: A possible Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) was photographed in flight in the Comox Valley, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in January of 2008. It had been part of a group of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) feeding in a field. It appeared to be an adult or sub-adult bird with extensive yellowish markings on the bill, similar to those of a Whooper Swan. However, it had yellowish or yellow-grey legs instead of the usual black. Photographs were sent to various ornithologists in Europe and North America who are familiar with whooper and/or North American swans. Opinions were divided; some identified it as a Whooper Swan while others said it was not. Some suggested it might be a hybrid with whooper parentage. Diagnosis as a leucistic Trumpeter Swan was ruled out by expert opinion and failure to conform to any known colour variant. I conclude that the bird was most likely a Whooper Swan with leucistic legs and feet. It is possible that the bird was a domestic escapee although that is less likely in the western parts of North America. Three previous records of Whooper Swans have been published and apparently accepted for British Columbia.

Key words: Whooper Swan, (*Cygnus cygnus*), Trumpeter Swan, (*Cygnus buccinator*), range, accidental, distribution, occurrence, hybrid, leucism, escapee.

The purpose of this note is to document, for future reference, the sighting of an unusual swan.

On 2008 January 22, at approximately 14:00 Pacific Standard Time, I approached a group of Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) for the purpose of photography. Mrs. Joni Shuttleworth of Qualicum Beach, B.C. accompanied me. The location was the Farquharson Farm in the Comox Valley, just east of the town of Courtenay, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The exact location was at 49° 41' 40" N, 124° 58' 44" W, which is east of the northerly part of Courtenay, 1.3 km east of the Courtenay River. The Farquharson farm is large, has fields seasonally planted in corn and pumpkins and is noted for flocks of wintering Trumpeter Swans

I parked my car about 150 m from a flock of approximately ten adult and three juvenile swans, and proceeded a few metres closer on foot in order to photograph the birds. I stopped approaching because the swans started calling loudly and walking away. Some swans took flight. When I looked around to see if any were flying within camera range, I saw a lone swan flying towards me. I was fortunate to get twelve photographs of this swan in flight before it disappeared south-westerly into the sun. One of the pictures was a clear side view at a close range of about 20 m (Figure 1). The day was sunny and favourable for photography. Mrs. Shuttleworth also observed this swan and the photographing of it. We were in the field for about 25 minutes. I did not pursue additional pictures of the flock on the ground, in or-

der to avoid further disturbance.

The bird was approximately the size of a Trumpeter Swan. When I examined the photographs a few days later, the bird appeared to be have mostly white plumage suggestive of a swan in its second year, largely moulted into adult plumage with some brown young-of-the-year feathers still showing. It was evident that the bill was largely yellowish or yellow-grey with a black tip (Figure 1), which did not fit the pattern for any North American swan but according to various field guides, was consistent with the pattern for Whooper Swans (*Cygnus cygnus*), a Eurasian species. The photograph showed a bird with pale yellow to yellow-grey legs and feet, not the expected black of adult North American swans and Whooper Swans. Although the tail appears dark in Figure 1, that is apparently a shadow effect; other photographs showed white tail feathers. Because it took about a month for the tentative identification and a belated realization that this might be a rare bird, I did not try to find the bird again, nor was I able to give local birders an immediate alert.

The extensive pattern of yellow on the bill, appearing yellow-grey towards the base, combined with the black tip (Figure 1), is a pattern characteristic of Whooper Swans. In particular, Whooper Swans have yellow extending forward in a "v" shape on the side of the upper bill, with black above and below, and a small yellow "v" extending forward on the smaller lower bill (Sibley 2000; Brazil 2003). That pattern is evident in Figure 1 inset. Whooper Swans do not show

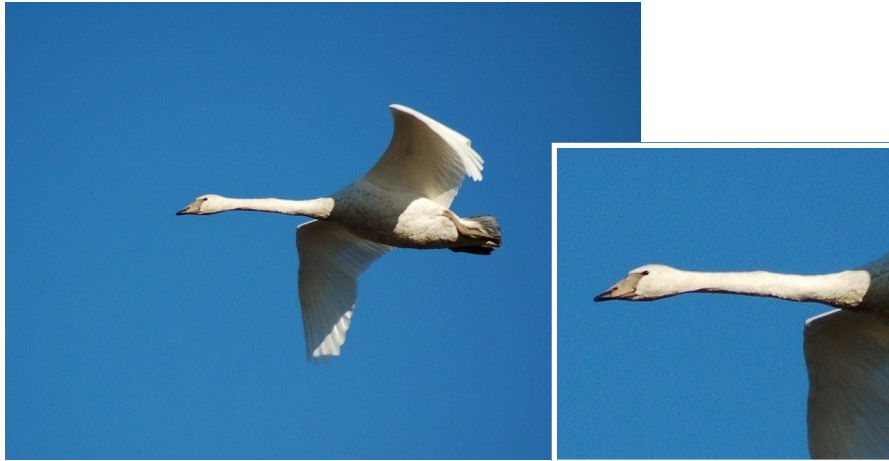


Figure 1. Photograph of an apparent Whooper Swan seen near Courtenay, B.C. on 2008 January 22. Of the twelve photographs taken of the bird, this was the one in which the bird was closest. The photograph is the original, without digital enhancement, but cropped to show only the bird. Inset: an enlarged portion of the original, to show the colour pattern on the bill. This photo has been cropped but not digitally enhanced.

any black at the base of the bill, nor did the swan seen near Courtenay. Whooper Swans have black at the tip and on the top surface of the bill, extending towards the base but falling far short of reaching the base, and show some variation in the pattern at the rear of that black portion (Brazil 2003). The pattern of black seen in Figure 1 appears to conform to that of a Whooper Swan on the top surface of the bill, but it is difficult to ascertain this since the bird is viewed from slightly below. Juvenile Trumpeter Swans have flesh-coloured bills, but the bill is “always black at the base” (Sibley 2000) which is not the case with the swan seen near Courtenay.

The yellowish or yellow-grey colour of the feet and legs is a puzzling feature. Although juvenile Trumpeter Swans have light-coloured feet and legs, the adults have black ones as do adult Whooper Swans. Brazil (2003:84) states that “among Whooper Swans in Iceland birds with mottled brownish and pale feet have been seen.” This is further discussed below.

On the presumption that this might be another record of a Whooper Swan in British Columbia, I carried out further investigation which is reported below.

Range and occurrence of Whooper Swans

The Whooper Swan generally breeds in northern Europe and Asia, with one record from Attu on the Aleutian Islands, and winters in southern Europe and east Asia as far south as China. It is also known to winter in small numbers in the Aleutian Islands (Campbell *et al.* 2001; Brazil 2003). It is considered an uncommon local winter visitant in the western and central Aleutian Islands of Alaska where it occurs in family groups or small flocks from early November through mid-April (Kessel and Gibson 1978), or more rarely in the Pribilof Islands before early May (Armstrong 1995).

Whooper Swans have occasionally been reported as far

south as California. A Whooper Swan was well-documented in the company of Trumpeter Swans near Ferndale, Washington, in the northwestern part of the state, about 70 km south of the Canadian border in February and March of 2007 (VNHS 2007). Most North American field guides mention the Alaskan occurrence, and note rare or casual presence elsewhere in the western part of the continent, although some of these are considered suspect, or escapees (National Geographic 1999).

In British Columbia, the Whooper Swan is “*Accidental* in the Georgia Depression and Coast and Mountains ecoprovinces; *accidental* in the Southern Interior Ecoprovince” (Campbell *et al.* 2001). The species is included in the recent checklist of 500 birds found in B.C. (Campbell *et al.* 2007) as a species that does not breed in the province. Three sightings in B.C. up to 2000 are described by Campbell *et al.* (2001) as follows. The first B.C. record was 1997 November 11, when “knowledgeable birdwatchers discovered an adult Whooper Swan among a flock of 26 adult and juvenile Trumpeter Swans in a bay near Port Hardy on northern Vancouver Island. The flock had departed early the following day. This sighting is noteworthy because on 23 October 1977, 2 Whooper Swans were found among a flock of 26 Trumpeter Swans at Cordova in southcoastal Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978).” Campbell *et al.* (2001) further report that in 1996, from July 25 to 27, “a single adult Whooper Swan was present in Seal Bay, in the Comox-Courtenay area ... (Innes 1997). It was photographed on 26 July ... and later confirmed” by an authoritative person. “In the Southern Interior, an adult and juvenile were present on Mamit Lake, 16 km south of Logan Lake, from 7 to 17 November 1999” (*loc. cit.*).

Survey of expert opinions

Upon the realization that this was an unusual swan I posted the best photograph (Figure 1) on a web-based dis-

cussion forum for the Vancouver area, seeking assistance in identification. The opinions of birders were divided, with some saying they could not identify the bird and some saying that the photograph was of poor quality and the bird was a Trumpeter Swan with mud on its feet and bill.

Since there has not been a functioning British Columbia Bird Records Committee for several years, I could not submit the sighting to a provincial committee. Therefore, I sought the opinions of various people in Europe and North America by sending them emails with the best photograph (Figure 1) and in some cases all 12 photographs. People in the United Kingdom were purposely included because they are familiar with Whooper Swans. Comments of these people are outlined below, but none of them advised that mud was the cause of the yellowish colour.

Some individuals identified the bird as a Whooper Swan. Mr. Tony Stratham of the British Museum of Natural History Bird Club and Honorary Secretary of the British Ornithologists' Club concluded: "... after some discussion and research the collective opinion here is that your swan is/was a Whooper Swan. Thanks to your excellent photograph we do not think that mud could be so clearly delineated on the bill to be masking a different bill."

Mr. Brian Morrell, Learning Manager of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, Caerlaverock Wetland Centre, in Dumfriesshire, Scotland stated: "I'm certain that it is a Whooper Swan, the bill can't be anything else and occasionally they have pale legs. I have consulted Richard Hesketh, one of our top Swan experts at WWT, and he concurs."

Mr. Joseph Morlan of the California Bird Records Committee confirmed by email that "it looks like a Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) which is a rarity in North America", and indicated, "I am aware of three other sightings of the Whooper Swan in British Columbia".

Another professional did not support designation as a Whooper Swan. Dr. Mark Brazil, author of a book on this species (Brazil 2003), offered the following opinions. "I am not convinced that it is a Whooper. What ever is affecting its bill pattern is also affecting the leg and foot colouring – some lack of pigment that is neither normal with adult Whoopers [n]or with immatures. I imagine that any identification as Whooper so far has been dependent on the amount of yellow on the bill, but both the colour and extent are abnormal. Furthermore the overall shape of the head/bill look atypical ... my impression of head shape is that it fits one of the North American species, perhaps Trumpeter with some pigmentation issues."

However, another authority on swans ruled out North American species. Carl Mitchell of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is a leading expert on Trumpeter Swans (Mitchell 1994). He "was initially of the opinion that it was a Whooper Swan, but I do not have much personal experience with that

species and am willing to concede the point to others with more extensive knowledge. *It is definitely not a Trumpeter, Tundra, or Mute swan* [emphasis added]. Therefore, if it is not a Whooper Swan, it must be a hybrid of some sort, presumably with some Whooper Swan genes." Mitchell added that Trumpeter Swans "do occasionally have yellow tarsi, but I have never seen a leucistic swan with anything other than a black bill."

Mitchell circulated photos to some of his acquaintances who were familiar with swans, and received six opinions in addition to people mentioned above. Among those people, opinions again varied. Two who had published research on Whooper Swans thought it was not a whooper, based on the extent of yellow on the bill and the yellow tarsi. They suggested it was one of the native North American swans, but Mitchell said that opinion was "untenable". The four people working with Tundra and Trumpeter swans thought it might be a Whooper Swan or a hybrid of some kind.

Discussion

I conclude that this bird was not a Trumpeter Swan because it did not fit any known colour variant of the species. McEneaney (2005) published a specific study on rare colour variants of Trumpeter Swans. He found nine variants of adults or sub-adults, with legs of black (normal), yellow, orange, pink, grey, grey-pink or grey-yellow. The grey-yellow colour would seem to fit the colour of the bird near Courtenay. Seven of the trumpeter variants had all-black bills. The only variant with a light-coloured bill had an all-pink bill and pink legs. One other variant had small yellow lores but with black legs. None of those variants of the Trumpeter Swan fit the bird described here. The statement of Mitchell, given above, also indicates that a Trumpeter Swan with light legs would have a black bill. Accordingly, the bird was not likely to have been a leucistic Trumpeter Swan because the colours of bill and legs did not match any previous pattern seen in the above-mentioned extensive sightings of the species.

The bill pattern does not fit that of the smaller Tundra Swan, neither the sub-species in North America nor the one in Eurasia. This is supported by the rather definite opinion of Mitchell, given above, that this was not a North American species.

The possibility of a Trumpeter Swan with mud must be considered. However it seems unlikely that the feet and legs would be so completely and precisely covered, yet without any apparent mud on the nearby feathers. It seems even more unlikely that only the basal parts of the bill, and not the distal parts, would have a mud coating that imitated the general pattern of Whooper Swans, and further, that the mud would extend exactly to the line where the

bill met the facial feathers, again without any apparent mud on the feathers.

In spite of a lack of consensus among various birding authorities, I conclude that this bird was likely a Whooper Swan, because of its size, the extensive yellow on its bill, and its failure to fit usual field marks of North American species. A likely presumption is that this was a Whooper Swan with leucistic legs, a condition which is documented among the related Trumpeter Swans by the work of McEneaney (2005) and the opinion of Mitchell, described above.

There is a possibility that this bird was a hybrid with a Whooper Swan as one parent. Hybrids can occur (Sibley 1938), although Brazil (2003:88) says of the Whooper Swans in North America "...as yet I have found no evidence of them hybridising with Trumpeters."

It cannot be said whether the bird was wild or an escapee from some person interested in breeding waterfowl. However, escapees are considered more likely to occur in eastern parts of North America, with wild Whooper Swans more likely in the west. Brazil (2003:227) states that "in general, birds seen in western North America are assumed to be wild, whereas those on the east coast are more suspect."

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Mr. Joseph Morlan of California, Mr. Tony Stratham in England and Mr. Brian Morrell and Mr. Richard Hesketh in Scotland, all with affiliations mentioned in the text. I thank Carl D. Mitchell of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Dr. Mark A. Brazil, until recently a professor at Rakuno Gakuen University in Hokkaido, Japan. Dr. John B. Sprague, Salt Spring Island, B.C. gave guidance on the technical writing and provided references, and Barbara Whyte aided in the writing of this report. Also greatly appreciated are helpful comments from R.A. Buhler and an anonymous reviewer.

Literature Cited

- Armstrong, R.H. 1995. *Guide to the birds of Alaska*. Fourth edition. Alaska Northwest Books, Portland, Oregon. 323 p.
- Brazil, M. 2003. *The Whooper Swan*. T. & A.D. Poyser, an imprint of A. & C. Black Publishers Ltd., London. Illustrated by Dafila Scott. 512 p.
- Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, A.C. Stewart and M.C.E. McNall 2001. *Birds of British Columbia. Volume 4. Passerines. Wood-warblers through Old World sparrows*. UBC Press, Vancouver. 739 p.
- Campbell, R.W., M.J. Preston, L.M. Van Damme, T. Greenfield and M.K. McNicholl 2007. *Wildlife checklists of British Columbia. The birds of British Columbia*. Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies, Victoria B.C. Special Publication No. 3, 14 p.
- Innes, D. 1997. A swan for British Columbia. *B.C. Naturalist* 35(3):5-6. [Cited through Campbell *et al.* 2001]
- Kessel, B. and D.D. Gibson 1978. *Status and distribution of Alaska birds*. Studies in Avian Biology No. 1. Allen Press, Lawrence, Kansas. 100 p. [Cited through Campbell *et al.* 2001]
- McEneaney, T. 2005. Rare color variants of the Trumpeter Swan. *Birding* 37(2):148-154 [American Birding Association]
- Mitchell, C.D. 1994. Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*). No. 105 in A. Poole (ed.). *The Birds of North America Online*. Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, N.Y. <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/105> (Accessed 2008 March 15)
- National Geographic 1999. *Field guide to the birds of North America*. Third Edition. National Geographic Society, Washington. 480 p.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. *National Audubon Society the Sibley guide to birds*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 544 p.
- VNHS [Vancouver Natural History Society] 2007. Rare bird alert for March 3rd. VNHS, Vancouver, B.C. www.birding.bc.ca/regions/vancouver/vancouver-rba.php

