Upper Mississippi River

National Wildlife & Fish Refuge

Tundra Swan Facts

Brownsville Overlook,
©Alan Stankevitz

Tundra Swan Facts

For many people, fall is not complete without viewing the tundra swans. Migrating day and night, their woo-hoo, woo-hoo call can be heard across the river valley.

Best viewing locations

Brownsville Overlook south of Brownsville, MN, on Hwy 26; Shady Maple Overlook south of La Crosse, WI, on Hwy 35; Rieck's Lake north of Alma, WI on Hwy 35; Weaver Bottoms north of Minnieska, MN on Hwy 61.

Identification

Adults are white with black bills; the young, called cygnets, are grey with pink bills.

When are they here?

Late October through freeze-up, 20-45% of the eastern population of swans visit the refuge. Up to 25,000 can be seen resting and feeding at one time.

Why are they here?

To rest and feed undisturbed. The refuge is a stop-over site where they build up fat reserves, swans' migration fuel, for the last leg of their journey.

What are they eating?

The swans fuel up on starchy bulbs, or tubers, of plants like arrowhead (duck potato), wildcelery and sago pondweed. The tubers buried in the river bottom are dislodged by the swan's large webbed feet. With their long necks they can reach the tasty morsels.

Where do they winter?

On the Atlantic coast from New Jersey to South Carolina, where they feed on shellfish, waste corn, soybeans and winter wheat.

Are swans here during spring migration?

A small number stop, usually the last two weeks of March, before returning to their breeding grounds on the tundra of Canada and Alaska.

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