



## **January 2021 Newsletter**

### **Mason Neck State Park Critters of the Month: Tundra Swans**

Text and photos by Randy Streufert



It's again that time of year when the waters in and around Mason Neck State Park are a seasonal home to Tundra Swans.

They make an annual migration from north of the Arctic Circle. Typically arriving here in mid-December, they usually return north near the end of March. However, the timing each year varies depending on weather conditions.



This year flocks were seen in early November flying, over the park heading further south towards coastal marshes and inland waterways. (A Canada Goose chose to accompany this group.)



The park's neighboring Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge (EHMN NWR) hosted the first arrivals with five Tundra Swans in mid-November. Just two weeks later they numbered about 60.

The best place to see them in the park is in Belmont Bay near the shore close to the Visitor Center. They gather there since it provides a sheltered place to rest when the tide is low in the marsh. During high tide many swans, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, head for the Great Marsh. When the high tide is in the morning the best viewing of them is from the Great Marsh trail in the EHMN NWR. It is accessed from a paved parking lot near the end of Gunston Road. There is a three-quarter mile ADA-compliant paved trail ending at a platform overlooking the marsh. The morning sun comes up from behind the platform, offering a clear view of the marsh.



When the tide is high in the afternoon, the best view is from the covered platform on Woodmarsh Trail. The trail is accessed from the unpaved Woodmarsh parking lot on High Point Road (about one-half mile from Gunston Road). It's about a 20 to 30 minute walk to the platform from the parking lot. The Woodmarsh trail is not paved and there can be some wet and muddy areas. The afternoon sun comes in from behind the platform, making for a great view.



Adult Tundra Swans are white. The grayish swan in the photo on the left is a juvenile with its parents. The photo on the right shows an adult with dirty red breast feathers. The color is from the red clay mud in the marsh.

Often a swan's head gets the same mud color as it dabbles, feeding on marsh grass.



The population of swans on the Great Marsh typically varies each year between about 100 and well over 500. In the winter of 2018, there were only about two dozen. That year's record rainfall significantly reduced the presence of the grasses the swans eat, requiring most to seek locations with better food supplies.



If the temperatures remain below freezing for several days, the marsh waters will ice over, and the swans will probably not be present.



Neither the park nor the Friends will be sponsoring a hike to see the Tundra Swans this year due to the pandemic. However, both the park and the EHMN NWR are open seven days a week. The park opens at 8AM and the refuge when it's light. Weekdays have the fewest visitors, so be safe and plan your own hike based on the tides and weather.

---

# **Members and Friends Enjoyed Our Swanfall Program, "All About Foxes."**



The Friends' annual holiday program was held online instead of at the Jammes House due to the pandemic. Erin Thady, a Wildlife Biologist with Fairfax County presented an informative and enjoyable discussion about red foxes and gray foxes, and Brad Miller, an Education Support Specialist for the Park, related his experiences with two injured and abandoned red fox kits in the Park that were rehabilitated and released back into the wild. Seventy-three people registered for the program. Hopefully, we'll be able to return to the Jammes House and the hors d'oeuvres buffet for next year's program.

---

## **Breaking Story: Songbirds Plan Boycott on Mason Neck!**

[This article was reprinted with permission from "Eats for Beaks" © publications, 2020; all rights reserved.

\*\*\*\*\*



## ***Eats for Beaks***

*"The songbirds' most reliable newspaper on this area's avian eateries"*

\*\*\*\*\*



Story by Chick O'Dee

December 28, 2020, 7:30 AM

• 4 minute read

Our songbird readers know Mason Neck is one of our favorite Northern Virginia habitats. Many of the resident bipeds (humans) have feeding stations for our benefit. Some of them do it because we keep the insect population down, especially in spring and summer when we're raising our broods of chicks. As you parents know, you have to catch over 6,000 arthropods (insects, spiders, & caterpillars) just to raise one brood of four to five hatchlings (we Chickadees often have six!).

But most bipeds have bird feeding stations just to see us up close near their homes. It's no wonder because in all modesty, we **ARE** beautiful with our varied colors, sizes and shapes. We get food without much effort, so it's a mutually beneficial arrangement.

**But all is not well on Mason Neck.** A troubling report surfaced about what had been a reliable feeding station. After many years of

having a 5-Star rating with different types of feeders and food, this avian eatery's rating dropped to 1-Star. It no longer meets the needs of most of our songbird readers and drastic action is being considered.

This *Eats for Beaks* reporter went to the scene to investigate. A diversity of songbirds was gathered near the failing feeding station to share what they knew and plan a coordinated response.



I listened in as Wendy Wren described to the others what she learned. "Apparently there are new bipeds living in the house. Just last week a lot of human stuff was taken away including the feeders and a few days later other stuff was moved in. The humans now living there don't look the same. They must be new to this neighborhood. They did put up one feeder and are keeping it filled so far."

Terry Titmouse spoke up. "Yes, that's true, but we used to see a variety of seeds, nuts and suet. But now the single feeder only has wild bird seed mix. UGH!!! I think they get it at their grocery store. They must think all of us will eat the same food, no matter whether we're Jays, Finches, or Nuthatches or Woodpeckers."





Jennifer Junco interrupted, "Just hold on, Terry! That bird seed mix is **exactly** what us Juncos and our buddies the Sparrows like. All those tiny little seeds are what we look for on the ground when we're away from human habitat. As you other birds search through that mix in the feeder looking for those few sunflower seeds, you knock the rest out and it falls where we then can get it. Since you spill so much, the feeder quickly empties, and the bipeds keep refilling it, apparently believing all songbirds love it too. We Juncos come down here in the winter when food supplies further north start to disappear. We're happy to get what you don't like!"



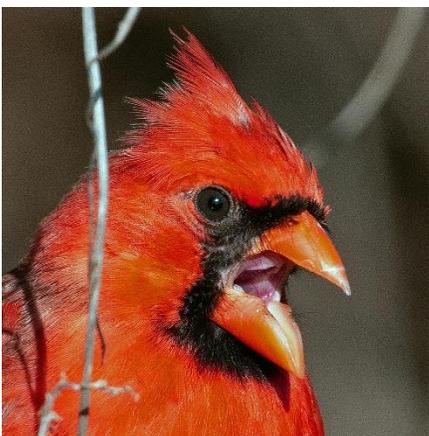
"That's right!" said Sarah Sparrow.

Wendy replied, "Jennifer, you just made my point! These bipeds must think that just because we all fly, we all must perch and prefer to eat in the same way. Tell **THAT** to my Nuthatch friends who are up-side-down to us, but for them it's how they like to eat! The ground just won't do."



**“Thank You!”** said Nate Nuthatch, adding, “Some of you like to eat on a platform or a small round perch. We Nuthatches and my woodpecker friends have bodies designed to land and hang on to tree trunks where we look for insects. We need feeders made for **us!** We’re all songbirds, but we’re not all shaped the same. We have vastly different size feet, and we have different feeding postures – can’t these humans see that?” Clearly agitated, he continued: “And those bipeds should realize that when Jays eat, their natural desire is to chase the rest of us smaller birds away.”

**“Tell me about it!!!** Karen Kinglet quickly added, “Even our Cardinal friends do that! There should be a separate feeder to accommodate just those of us who have a more petite size.”



Charlie Cardinal chimed right in, “Karen, remember that we are bigger and need more food. Some of you smaller birds arrive in flocks and quickly empty the feeders of the best seed.”



"**Best seed**, Charlie?" retorted Gary Goldfinch, you've got the beak to easily crack open **any** seed including the really hard safflower. Even Blue Jays have trouble with it. We Finches and our visiting Pine Siskin cousins can't open safflower and have a hard time with sunflower. We should not have to work hard just to pry one open to eat the kernel. We need thistle. It's so small you bigger guys ignore it, but it's what we love."

Sam Siskin added, "Thank you, Gary, for remembering us. We only come down here in winters when there's a poor seed crop up north."



Doug Downy joined the chorus of complaints with "We need protein! This time of year, most insects have gone into hiding. Suet or nuts, especially shelled peanuts, are a great substitute for bugs when it gets cold. We'll even enjoy the fat trimmed from beef; it may not be appetizing to humans, but virtually all of us will eat it in winter and it's cheap. The humans can get it at most grocery stores since butchers don't want it and they sell it for almost nothing."



"Don't forget mealworms!" mumbled Barry Bluebird with his beak full. "I got these at another house. Some really bird-knowledgeable people live there. Even freeze-dried mealworms are good but you can't beat these fresh, wiggling little guys – very tasty and high in protein. And just because we're insect eaters doesn't mean we won't pass up food pellets designed just for us."

Charlie Cardinal, apparently not wanting to further alienate his fellow songbirds, added "I think we all wish all the humans would routinely clean their feeders. Don't they know mold accumulates when it's humid? And it doesn't go away when it's cold. The other day there was a lot of rain. Do they check to make sure the seed stayed dry? As we know, seed quickly goes bad when it gets moist."



George, a juvenile Grosbeak, pleaded, "Speaking of water, the bipeds forget we need to drink just as much as every other animal. Where are we supposed to get a drink when the water is frozen?? A bird bath (with a heater in the winter) or a misting device will bring a lot

of us around just to quench our thirst, even those of us who never come to feeders.”

“**Yes, Yes!!**” shouted Ronda Redstart. “And there’s nothing like taking a shower in July and August when it’s really hot.”



“I really like taking a bath,” added Terry. It’s such a great and refreshing feeling to get rid of the dirt and any mites that get on my feathers.”

While the songbird discussion went on, this reporter spotted a couple of vultures perched in the higher branches of a nearby tree. Since vultures aren't competitors for songbird food or prey on us, I thought their perspective on the new bipeds would be worth hearing.

I introduced myself to Tara Turkey Vulture and her friend Betty Black Vulture. With my promise to quote them accurately in *Eats for Beaks*, Tara volunteered that they’d been listening in on the songbirds’ discussion with mild interest.



"We are really fortunate not to rely on just a few feeding stations like you songbirds do. Every human that drives a vehicle is our friend. They all hit squirrels and occasionally raccoons, foxes and opossums. When a deer is hit, we throw a party and invite all our friends to join in on the feast. We love to clean up those carcasses and when we're finished, the disease-carrying fly population goes away. In the warmer months after we're done, there's no more stench from roadkill. Unfortunately, we often must stand in the busy streets to get that food, which makes us potential roadkill too. But what we really don't understand is that despite all benefits we provide, the bipeds think of us as disgusting and ugly. They can't even fly but *we're* called ugly? Really??"



Betty added, "None of them want to watch us eat or even see us. Do the bipeds actually prefer having bloated rotting carcasses smelling up their neighborhood? By the way Chick, that fragrance is intoxicating to us." Tara interrupted, "Please, stop Betty, you're making me hungry!"

This reporter considered offering them a couple of much-needed breath mints, but instead decided to rejoin the songbirds.

Back with the flock, Charlene Chickadee (no relation to this reporter) was saying, "Doesn't this biped family know theirs' is

not the only eatery in the area? We get around and we know of some stiff competition for our presence. Other human houses have a variety of cuisine on various styles of feeders, and birdbaths too.



Charlie Cardinal reminded the group, "As the Virginia State Bird, I feel I must defend the humans. None of those bipeds are born knowing what we songbirds need and like. They just have to do a little research. Their National Audubon Society and Cornell Lab of Ornithology websites and many others have lots of information about all of us birds."



Interjecting, Wanda Woodpecker said, "Charlie you don't have to keep reminding us about your special status, but you do make a good point. Since these newly arrived humans do put out simple seed mix, their hearts must be in the right place and want us to show up."

She then proposed, "Let's boycott this feeding station until improvements are made. Our absence should be the human's incentive to find out why we aren't coming around. Even the Juncos and Sparrows will have to go elsewhere without us to knock that seed mix to the ground. A few of us can stop by now and then to see if improvements are made. If the bipeds start putting out thistle, sunflower, or suet and/or nuts, we'll start showing up again. Once

they see our brilliant, reds and blues, browns and yellows, silvers and blacks, they'll be hooked. But only results count! No improvements, no showing up!"



Charlene agreed with Wanda's motion and said: "All in favor, raise your wing." The vote was unanimous, then they all left. Only time will tell if these new humans are interested in having songbirds visit their yard.

Reporting on the scene in Mason Neck, this is your traveling *Eats for Beaks* investigative reporter, Chick O'Dee.

"May the Seed be with You."



[Story and photos by Randy Streufert]

---

# Please Help Us Support Mason Neck State Park!

If you are already a member of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park, **Thank You!** Your membership dues and donations help us to support the Park's activities, and also enable us to fund special events such as our Owl Moon evening each fall and the annual Swanfall Holiday Program at the Jammes House each December. We've had to suspend our activities for the past couple of months, but we're hopeful of being able to resume our many activities at the park in the near future.

If you aren't a member, or your membership has lapsed, you can become a member at [Join the Friends of Mason Neck State Park](#).

You can also donate to the Friends [here](#).