

Remembering Aurora's Swan King?



If you've ever looked out your window and spotted a flock of trumpeter swans flying overhead, you have Aurora resident Harry Lumsden to thank for that.

Less than 30 years ago, trumpeter swans, which once called Ontario home, were nowhere to be found. It was a troubling reality that Lumsden set out to reverse and his successful efforts garnered him several honours, including the Order of Canada.

But more meaningful to him than awards was seeing his dream come to fruition.

By the time of his death at his Aurora residence on February 8, just one month shy of his 99th birthday, trumpeter swans were not only wild once again throughout the Province, but had extended their range into the eastern United States as well.

"Over the years, we have had the honour to stand behind this modest man who only ever wanted to draw attention to the swans rather than himself," said representatives of the Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program last week, reflecting on the man who rarely granted interviews. "It is because of his vision we must give credit for the beauty of the trumpeter swans we see today in Ontario.

"Harry Lumsden was a man of great accomplishment and a life well lived, full of legacies, respected worldwide for his work in rehabilitating the trumpeter swan population in Ontario, a self-taught biologist/ornithologist, and a life-long student of birds."

The organization said Lumsden became interested in birds as early as the age of four when his father took him to see a song thrush nest. It was the start of a life-long love affair.

Born in Scotland, Lumsden first came to Canada during the Second World War.

As a member of the Royal Air Force, he was stationed in Canada on a three-year tour of duty.

During his stint in Ontario, a visit to the Royal Ontario Museum only stoked his interest in birds further and he settled in Canada

after the conflict.

After extensive work with the Canadian Wildlife Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he began his work on the endangered trumpeter swan in 1982, which soon became his primary focus.

“He realized trumpeter swans were once found throughout most of southern Ontario and he sort of took it upon himself to reintroduce them using existing prairie population,” says local landscape architect David Tomlinson, a long-time friend of Lumsden's who was heavily involved in his work.

Lumsden's first attempt was to import eggs from these prairie populations and place them in the nests of Ontario's mute swans. But mute and trumpeter cygnets are not birds of a feather and, before long, these chicks were rejected by their “parents.”

A better solution was found: buying swans on the open market from aviculturalists, and giving a pair of swans to anyone in Ontario who could take care of them and provide the correct environment for them to flourish.

If there were cygnets, Lumsden and Tomlinson would travel throughout Ontario to catch them and bring them to an aviary in Cambridge, ON, that had open water throughout the winter and they could receive the care they needed as the death rate was very high in those early years.

After a year, the duo would pick up the birds and release them throughout Ontario from North Bay to Prince Edward County.

“Harry was a born scientist, although he never actually qualified,” says Tomlinson. “He was just good at what he did; he was a highly senior scientist with the Ministry and wrote over 100 significant papers.”

Sharing an interest in swans with Mr. Lumsden is Donna Lewis, a lead with the Aurora Horticultural Society who is a landscaper on the expansive Stronach property in the southeast quadrant of Bayview and Wellington.

Ms. Lewis and Mr. Lumsden first crossed paths in 2010 when she contacted the Wye Marsh on a number of tagged swans that appeared on their property. Less than two hours later, she received a call from Lumsden and he drove across Aurora to see them.

“He couldn't figure out where his swans had been going over the years,” says Lewis with a laugh. “We have open water for them in the winter and every winter we had these strange swans come in with tags, and it was happening every year. I didn't know too much about them, one book that was 96 pages on how to care for the swans. I kept them healthy and I thought it was pretty neat.”

After he had inspected the swans on the Stronach property, he invited her over to his home in Aurora's southwest to see his population.

“This guy I just met, I went home with him!?” she jokes. “From that moment on, it became quite a friendship. The biggest thing he wanted to do was establish a self-sustaining breeding population with migratory tendencies and he figured he would be successful if there were enough swans that a hunt would open. He wasn't particularly fond about having a hunt?but he figured if there were so many of them that they could actually hunt them and not hurt the population he would be completely successful. He was successful in that we have a self-sustaining breeding population that migrates and is expanding its range all throughout Ontario and into the U.S.?”

As he got older, Lewis says Lumsden “cultivated” people to help carry on his legacy, including herself.

“We now have a collection of people who, moving forward, we're creating a true not-for-profit charity with tax receipts, a board of directors, and we're going to continue monitoring the swans and sharing that information while encouraging other people to share the information.”

In this way, Lumsden's legacy in Ontario will endure, but Tomlinson has another idea on how to ensure Harry's legacy in his own hometown.

?Very few people know this, but Aurora is a major, if not the major wintering place for trumpeter swans,? he says. ?There are between 200 and 300 swans wintering in Aurora every winter on the Stronach property. If that property is ever sold, it is probable that the trumpeter swan population there will be lost. I think it would be interesting for the Town to think about moving the feeding of these swans to the Nature Reserve right across the road. If that was done, that would make Aurora a major tourist spot in the winter with a hell of a lot of people paying money to come and look at hundreds of swans in the winter.?

Harry Lumsden is survived by his three daughters, Jennifer, Deborah, and Diana, and three grandchildren: Chris, Heather and Jake.

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