

# Tundra Swan

## Native Range Map



Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Subphylum: Vertebrata  
Class: Aves  
Order: Anseriformes  
Family: *Anatidae*  
Genus: *Cygnus*  
Species: *columbianus*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

## Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The tundra swan breeds and nests in the wet Arctic tundra of Alaska and far northern Canada. They are generally found along coastlines. Throughout the winter months and during migration, they can be found in shallow lakes, slow moving rivers, flooded fields and estuaries along the west coast of the United States, Texas, New Mexico, and along the eastern seaboard.
- **Exhibit Location:** Swan Pond

## Characteristics

- Length: 47-58 inches; Weight: 9-23 pounds; Wingspan: 5.5-7 feet
- The tundra swan is a large, all-white waterfowl with a long, straight neck. The adults have a black bill often with a yellow spot in front of the eye. Both adults and juveniles have black feet and black eyes.
- Young birds have a pink bill and grayer body feathers.
- The sexes look alike, although the males are slightly larger than the females.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild:** 15-20 years; **In Captivity** 25 – 30 years

## Behaviors

- Tundra swans feed and travel in flocks and form long-term pair bonds.
- The swans graze on grasses but forage mostly in water during the day where undisturbed, they tip up to reach aquatic vegetation and use their long necks to reach as far as 3 feet below the surface.
- The tundra swan is a migratory bird. It winters in temperate areas, often in coastal regions on marshes, grasslands, or agricultural fields.
- They make loud, high-pitched cooing notes, less harsh than the honking of the Canada goose.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** insects, other birds

## Reproduction

- Tundra swans reach sexual maturity at 3-4 years of age.
- Tundra swans spread out from the flock to breed. Those swans remaining in the flock are young, non-breeding swans, failed breeders, or swans that have bred in previous years but for one reason or another are not breeding this particular season. Breeding occurs on shallow pools, lakes and rivers of the arctic North American tundra beginning in late May-June.
- They nest on large elevated mounds made of grasses and moss, lined with down. The creamy white 3-5 eggs are incubated for 30-35 days. The female rarely leaves her nest, which is frequently guarded by the male. The chicks hatch, covered with down and with their eyes open. They leave the nest within 24 hours of hatching and are able to feed and swim. The chicks will still need the care of their mothers for another 40-45 days. When this time comes, they can live on their own.

## Diet

- **In the Wild:** aquatic plants, seeds, tubers, grains, insects, small fish, frogs
- **At the Zoo:** avi pellets, cracked corn, wheat, trout chow

### Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** LC (Least Concern); **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- As a game species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service manage the tundra swan.
- The tundra swan is common and their estimated global population is at 300,000 individuals.
- Human action seems to be one of the only threats to the swan. Destruction of wetland habitat in the winter range has reduced food sources, but the swans adapted by shifting their winter habitat to agricultural fields.
- Predators: foxes, weasels, jaegers, gulls, wolves, bears, humans

### Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Males are called cobs, females are called pens, and the young are called cygnets.
- Tundra swans mate for life.
- During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, swan feathers were a fashionable accent for women's clothing, especially hats.
- The tundra swan used to be called the "Whistling swan" because of the whistling sound that was made when wind flew through its wings.
- Tundra swans sleep on land during the mating season (summer months) and on water during the winter.

### Sources:

- About, Inc., (2005). Tundra swan. Retrieved December 5, 2005, from About Birding/Wild Birds Web site: <http://birding.about.com/library/fg/blfg-cygnuscolumbianus.htm>
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology, (2003). Tundra swan. Retrieved December 5, 2005, from Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds Web site: [http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Tundra\\_Swan\\_dtl.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Tundra_Swan_dtl.html)
- del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A., & Sargatal, J. (Eds.) (1997). *Handbook of the birds of the world. vol. 1.* Barcelona, Spain: Lynx Edicions
- Kim, M. 1999. "Cygnus columbianus" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed September 5, 2006 at [http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Cygnus\\_columbianus.html](http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Cygnus_columbianus.html)
- Lahontan Audubon Society, (2000). A birding guide to reno and beyond - tundra swan, whistling swan. Retrieved December 5, 2005, from Lahontan Audubon Society Web site: <http://www.nevadaaudubon.org/BirdSites/TSwan.htm>
- Peterson, R. (2002). *Peterson field guides birds of eastern and central north america.* Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin.