

Plucky swan gets a second chance

Rehabilitated Alberta bird meets another hard-luck case while being readied for release in B.C.

BY HANNEKE BROOYMANS, EDMONTON JOURNAL DECEMBER 23, 2009



One of the rehabilitated tundra swans takes flight.

Photograph by: Tracy Riddell, edmontonjournal.com

A tundra swan that broke a wing in Alberta and fell hopelessly behind in its migration joined a flock Tuesday at an overwintering spot in British Columbia.

The swan had a lot of human help on its journey.

It was originally found in bad shape near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border by a couple from Cold Lake. They dropped it off at the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton in mid-October. Staff there figured out it had a fractured left wing, was dehydrated and drastically underweight.

In a few weeks, the wing healed and the swan's weight was brought up to 4.9 kilograms.

But it was hopelessly off its migration schedule.

Cheryl Feldstein, the society's executive director, stuck out a figurative thumb for the bird, hoping it could catch a lift to B.C. with someone.

The Air Canada employee team in Edmonton was asked about the possibility of transporting the swan, and the team took the initiative, Angela Mah, a company spokeswoman, said in an e-mail. "They happened to have the right-sized kennel on hand, and found a flight which could accommodate the bird, and they just made it happen," she wrote. "The day the swan was scheduled to fly was also one of the coldest during Edmonton's deep freeze, and so extra care was taken to ensure that the kennel was

kept in the heated vehicle for as long as possible and boarded last into the aircraft's belly just before the flight pushed back."

The bird arrived in B.C. almost two weeks ago, where its care was taken over by the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C. in Burnaby.

There, it was introduced to another hard-luck case. This juvenile swan was found sick and emaciated in Victoria. The two birds hit it off to the extent that they would become stressed if separated, said Lani Sheldon, a wildlife rehabilitation team leader with the association.

Before they could be released they had to be tested to make sure they were physically capable of surviving in the wild. Blood samples were taken to determine if they had enough red blood cells to carry sufficient oxygen to maintain flight. They also spent time in an outdoor conditioning pen with a large pool to make sure their feathers were 100-per-cent waterproof.

In the meantime, a few different flock locations were scouted, Sheldon said. Of the three main areas where tundra swans overwinter in the lower mainland, the Nicomen slough between Mission and Chilliwack was judged the best site for the two swans.

It turned out to be a textbook release, Sheldon said.

They were carted out, cosy together in one kennel and the door was opened in a field close to the flock.

"They toddled out of the kennel, the two of them followed one another. And within sort of about five steps they took to the air and made a huge circle. They basically checked out the whole field, made a large circle, they went really, really high and then they circled around back and basically landed right in the middle of the flock. They basically showed us what they had and integrated really well.

"When they landed the whole flock looked up, looked at them and then went back to their business."

The two swans are likely to stay with the flock in this area. They tend to spend their nights on the water and their days foraging in nearby fields.

Sheldon said the Canadian Wildlife Service has technicians out in the field quite often, monitoring swans and taking samples from sickly ones, looking for lead poisoning.

In March, the swans will head back up to Alaska, Yukon or the Arctic coast, Sheldon said.

Back in Alberta, Stephanie May of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Society of Edmonton, said it feels great to know the release went well.

"It's good to be a part of getting them back out into the wild and giving them a second chance."

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