

Do it now: Go swan-watching

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In Monticello, Minn., the swans just keep coming.

Fifteen trumpeter swans wintered there in 1987-88, drawn by warm discharge water from the nuclear power plant upstream and by the corn Mississippi River resident Sheila Lawrence was putting out for ducks and geese.

More came every year as the swan population rebounded in Minnesota. In 1966, when Hennepin Parks started to breed the birds in captivity, they hadn't been seen in the state for 82 years. They were thought to have vanished from the entire nation until a few nests were found in Yellowstone and then in Alaska in the 1950s. Minnesota was the first state allowed to collect eggs.

But in Monticello last year, 1,600 trumpeter swans, the largest water bird in North America, were seen at the peak of the season, and the same number is expected this year.

Lawrence still is feeding them from her back yard, more than 1,200 pounds of cracked corn daily, and she's the only human the birds tolerate. Everyone else watches from behind a rail fence on the river's edge.

There's a lot to see — family squabbles, bullying, showing off and, of course, graceful takeoffs and landings on wings that span 7 to 8 feet.

In February, parents start driving away year-old cygnets to make room for new broods, and courting displays begin as each young swan selects a mate it will keep for life.

There's a lot to hear, too, since the trumpeters are aptly named.

Lawrence feeds the birds between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., and visitors are invited to watch as long as they stay behind the rail and don't spook the birds.

Monticello is about an hour west of St. Paul. From Interstate 94, take exit 194 and turn right at the first stoplight. Go straight across County Road 75 and onto County Road 39. Drive 1/2 mile to Mississippi Drive and turn left. The park is very small, so parking is along the street; be sure not to block driveways or walk across neighbors' lawns.

For more information, call the Monticello Chamber of Commerce, 1-763-295-2700, www.monticellochamber.com.

Lawrence also keeps track of banded birds for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. To read her very interesting observations, see her piece on "The Monticello Swans" on the chamber Web site.

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