IDENTIFICATION AID
IMMATURE MUTE AND TUNDRA SWANS

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Identification of immature swans is normally a simple process of association, they are assumed to be the same species as the adults that accompany them. However, solitary immature swans pose a significant identification problem, especially during winter months when both tundra (Cygnus columbianus) and mute swans (Cygnus olor) are equally possible in Ohio (and the entire midwest). Standard field guides offer little help on this problem. While adults differ with regards to neck curvature, such differences are not apparent in immatures. Mute swans are generally larger than tundra swans although there is some overlap between the species; size differences would not be readily apparent in solitary birds. This article discusses an approach to identification of immature swans (much of this information was derived from Cramp et al. 1977 and field observation). Before their identification can be discussed, an understanding of mute swan "morphs" and the molt of immatures is a necessary prerequisite.

MUTE SWAN "MORPHS"

Few observers realize that there are 2 "morphs" of the mute swan, the typical "morph" illustrated in standard field guides and the so-called "Polish" swan. As adults, these "morphs" are quite similar, differing only in leg color (black in the typical "morph" but flesh colored in the "Polish" swan). They are readily separable in immature plumages. "Polish" swans are entirely white from hatching while the normal "morph" retains dusky brown coloration to the head, neck, and upperparts until it is 2 years old. Hence, "Polish " swans are easily identified by their white immature plumages and will not be mentioned elsewhere in this article.

MOLT SEQUENCE

Both mute and tundra swans undergo similar molt sequences. They retain their juvenile plumage for only a short period of time (measure in weeks), and are not likely to be encountered in Ohio in this plumagpy In the fall, they begin to molt into their first winter plumage. However, this molt is quite protracted in many individuals, continuing through winter into early spring (Palmer 1976). During the second summer, both species undergo another molt after which they are quite similar to adults.

IDENTIFICATION OF IMMATURE SWANS

Identification of these species is based entirely on 2 characteristics, bill color and coloration of the upperparts (back, wings and wing coverts). However, these characteristics change during the winter months, requiring assessment of the month(s) the bird was present as well as the observed field marks.

For both species, bill coloration exhibits considerable individual variation; a high degree of caution is necessary when using is as a field mark. In fall, immature tundra swans generally have dirty pink or reddish-pink bills with black tips. During the winter, their bills become grayish and eventually black. Mute swans exhibit the opposite pattern. In the fall, their bills are

entirely gray. They become suffused with pink during the winter and by spring are pink or dull orange with a black base. While differences in bill coloration are readily apparent in the fall (through mid-December) and spring (March or later), winter (late December through February) bills of both species may be identical and other characteristics must be examined.

In fall, both species are generally dingy brown above and whitish below. Tundra swans become increasingly pale during the winter and acquire many white feathers on the upperparts. By spring (March), only the head and necks of immatures are dingy brown, the remainder of the plumage is white. While immature mute swans also become paler during the winter, they retain many brown feathers on their wings, backs, and wing coverts into the summer season and can be recognized by their browned upperparts.

From the above discussion, it is apparent that solitary immature swans can be identified during the fall and spring. On the other hand, winter birds can be quite difficult or impossible to identify due to the similarities between the species and the great amount of individual variation. Should winter birds linger for several weeks or months, then changes in bill coloration or coloration of the upperparts may be useful in the identification of these birds.

LITERATURE CITED

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