

Swan spookings lead to a call for courtesy

Signs near the Mississippi River remind visitors to keep their distance from Monticello's wintering flock of trumpeter swans. At the swan viewing park on Mississippi Drive, left, swan watchers must stay within the park's fenced boundaries. In response to recent incidents where the swans were spooked by anglers or river traffic, the Monticello Chamber posted signs at Ellison Park, right, asking boaters to keep their distance from the swans. No regulations govern boating or fishing near the swans, but when scared into flight, the swans risk injury.

Swans rested and preened Tuesday morning on the Mississippi River near the city's swan viewing park. Monticello is home to what is likely the largest wintering flock of trumpeter swans in the Midwest; about 1,500 were here in December 2005.



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Curiosity may or may not have killed the cat, but one thing's certain: On more than one occasion, it's prompted hundreds of swans to take to the air in a panicked explosion of white wings. And while the en masse take-off has been described as a "thrilling" sight, it is not necessarily a healthy thing for Monticello's resident flock of wintering trumpeter swans. Nor is it beneficial to the people who travel more than 1,000 miles to Monticello's swan viewing park on Mississippi Drive, hoping to catch a glimpse of this large, trumpeting flock—likely the largest in the Midwest.

Curious people, too close

It's not the swans that are curious—it's the people. As the flock's fame has spread—and as its numbers continue to grow—more and more people are venturing to the Mississippi River on foot, by boat and by plane to gaze at the swans. Sometimes, they get too close.

That has happened a few times in the last two weeks, according to Mississippi Drive resident Sheila Lawrence. Lawrence, sometimes referred to as the "Swan Lady," has been feeding the trumpeters that gather on the river below her backyard for more than 15 years.

Usually, she said, the cold weather of December and January keeps people off the river. But this winter's unseasonably warm temperatures have brought out fishermen, flyers and even canoeists to share the water and airspace with the swans. Lawrence said the weekend of Jan. 7-8, ultralights flew over the river near the swans, a canoe headed downstream and fishermen wading upstream from the swans both may have come too close.

While none of those activities are illegal, curiosity can have adverse effects. "The swans must have thought they were being pursued from all directions," Lawrence said. "Once they get spooky like that, then anything will set them off. ... They react to things that they normally wouldn't react to. And then it takes them a while to settle back down." She said that sometimes takes a few days—but anglers were again out in the river last week.

"Normally, the birds kind of tolerate when they're kind of by Mississippi Shores," she said. "But these guys were on (the east) side of the water treatment plant. The swans consider that too close; it's more of an invasion of their space. And then they all just take off and leave."

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Panicked flight

That takeoff is spectacular, said Monticello Chamber Director Susie Wojchouski. "If you're ever there, when they get spooked and you've got 1,000 or 1,500 swans taking off at the same time, your hair even moves," Wojchouski said. "It gives you goosebumps; it's amazing. But then they don't come back for five days."

Such a massive departure puts the swans at risk for injury. When the swans quickly take to the air, they are more likely to hit power lines, and even the Hwy. 25 bridge, said Madeleine Linck, a biologist at Three Rivers Park District who works with the park district's Trumpeter Swan Society.

"They take a long time to get airborne," Linck said. "They're not like a mallard that can just lift up and maneuver. These birds have very big wingspans."

The swans can hit one another, too, Wojchouski added, causing injuries during a panicked takeoff.

"It's kind of a panic flight, because some will react, and then everybody else follows suit, and the whole sky is white," Lawrence said. "And a lot of people at the park think it's thrilling, but for those that come after, there's nothing to see."

The swans may have still been jittery last Thursday. Wojchouski said a tour bus came to the swan viewing area on Mississippi Drive, but only about 40 swans were in the river. Tour buses are frequent visitors to the park; Wojchouski said more than a dozen have visited Monticello already this winter for swan watching.

Growing flock

The swans have been coming to the Mississippi River in Monticello since the late 1980s. They appear to have chosen Monticello because the relatively warm water discharged from Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant, upstream, keeps the river ice-free during the winter. Lawrence's dedication to feeding the swans has helped the flock remain healthy through the winter, Linck said.

Last week's forty birds is a far cry—or trumpet—from the 785 swans Lawrence counted Saturday, Dec. 31, during the Audubon Society's annual winter bird count. The warm weather has likely been a factor in lower swan numbers; during mid-December's cold snap, Lawrence estimated 1,500 swans had flocked to the Mississippi. "I didn't even bother to count, because there were so many and they were so close together," she said. "It was more swans than I had ever seen."

Since then, the flock's numbers have thinned; some moved on, Lawrence said, while others have likely headed to other open water on area lakes and creeks.

There is no guarantee of numbers for the people who

come to the swan viewing area to see the flock, Linck noted. Because the swans are wild birds, they come and go as they please. But, if people are courteous and stay within the fenced area of the park, she added, the swans are less likely to take flight, meaning more people will be able to enjoy looking at the flock.

"They're really only there, roughly, December through early March," Linck said. "And once they leave in March, they are gone. This is not a really long time for people to have to at least be considerate of the birds." Be aware, be courteous

That means people should be aware of their space, Lawrence said. She explained that the swans seemed to have established boundaries along the river, stretching from just east of the city wastewater treatment plant downstream to the Battle Rapids area, near where Co. Rd. 39 curves close to the river's southern shore.

Anything inside that zone tends to make the swans nervous, so boats passing through the area are urged to stick to the northern shore. Fishermen are advised to stay out of the area.

"It's more of a risk when the boats or the canoes come down fast, rather than take their time, to give the birds time to see them," Lawrence said, so the swans may move out of the way.

The Chamber has posted signs in Ellison Park, asking fishermen and boaters to respect the swans' need for space. "You can't regulate who can be on the river, but you can politely ask people to observe a quarter-mile rule around the swans," Wojchouski said.

Lawrence, Wojchouski and Linck agree that avoiding spooking the swans has an added benefit: More people can enjoy the astonishing sight of the trumpeters from the viewing park. "I just feel disappointed for them; I feel bad if there aren't any birds for them to see," Lawrence said. Linck said she wanted what was best for the birds, while at the same time being reasonable about use of the river.

"I think people want to do the right thing," she said. "If they're educated that their actions could impact the birds' safety, I would think most people want to do what's best for the birds. It's such a gift to Monticello."

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(Article and photos by Eric O'Link)

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