

# Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) Restoration in the Blackfoot Watershed of Montana

## 2025 Progress Report

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### Introduction

In 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the University of Montana completed a Trumpeter Swan Habitat Suitability Study for the Blackfoot Watershed. The study assessed over 400 wetlands and determined that nine wetland sites were suitable for release of trumpeter swans and 29 were deemed to be suitable as nesting territories.

In 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, working with a committee of interested organizations and individuals, drafted an implementation and evaluation plan to guide restoration efforts for trumpeter swans in the Blackfoot Valley of Montana. Specifically, the goal of the restoration as stated in the plan is:

*“...to release trumpeter swans in the Blackfoot until such time as seven breeding pairs are established or until this evaluation suggests that the project should be terminated. (Established pairs are considered to be those that have fledged young at least twice from nests in the Blackfoot). Based on a 2004 habitat assessment in the Blackfoot, the maximum number of swans resulting from this reintroduction could approach 20 to 30 pairs, through pioneering and natural expansion of the flock. It is the intention of this restoration effort that this breeding flock be migratory, leaving the Blackfoot Valley in winter. This program has been approved by the Pacific Flyway Council and will be implemented in accordance with the Pacific Flyway Plan for the Rocky Mountain Population of Trumpeter Swans and the associated Trumpeter Swan Implementation Plan.”*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partners with the collaborative conservation nonprofit Blackfoot Challenge to implement the restoration plan.

### 2025 Update

From 2005-2021, 226 Trumpeter Swans were released in the watershed. All birds are marked with USGS aluminum leg bands and a red plastic leg band with white number/letter/number sequence (i.e. 3P1). All one-year-plus birds are also fitted with red and white neck collars bearing codes that match the red plastic leg bands. In 2021, the project goal of at least seven successful nests for at least two consecutive years was reached, and swans were no longer released in the watershed.

Since 2005 there have been over 4000 sightings of TRUS reported by project personnel and almost 100 additional observers, and at least 35 marked individuals have returned to the watershed in one or more years after their release. One marked swan, 2V1, spent the summer in

the watershed with a mate in 2025. However, there were very likely more birds that were not identified due to having only metal leg bands remaining. In 2025, there were at least 43 individuals in the watershed (Table 1).

Table 1. Locations and numbers of TRUS in the Blackfoot-Swan population in September 2025.

	White	Gray
<b>BLACKFOOT</b>		
Cadotte Creek	1	0
Sandbar Creek	2	3
Smith Lake	2	2
Blackfoot River /Ogden Mtn		
Tommy Geary Pond	2	3
Alkali/H2-O	2	4
Nevada Spring Creek		
Manley Reservoirs	2	1
Madison Meadow/Cooper Lake and Mill Ponds		
Doney Reservoir and Lake	2	
Blackfoot WPA ponds	2	
Kleinschmidt Lake		
Brown's Lake		
Golden Willow Pond		
Colburn Pond		
Jones Lake		
Widgeon Marsh	3	
Lahrity Lake	2	
Shoup		
Mud and James Lakes		
Two Creek Hay Meadow ponds	2	
Neudecker Lake		
Bandy Reservoir /Upsata Lake	2	2
Cotton Wood Creek	2	3
Placid Lake	2	5
Seeley Lake		
Rainy Lake	2	4
Summit Lake	2	
Clearwater Lake	2	
<b>TOTAL BLACKFOOT</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>SWAN VALLEY</b>		
Glacier Slough	2	4
King Wetland	2	3

Swan River Refuge	2	
<b>TOTAL SWAN</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>34</b>

### Nesting Activity

In 2010, the first territory was established in the Cottonwood Creek wetland and the first successful nesting occurred in 2011, when the Cottonwood Creek and Alkali Lake nests fledged a total of 6 cygnets. The numbers of pairs and nests have generally increased since 2010 (Table 2, Figure 1), and in 2025 there were 11 confirmed active nests in the Blackfoot. A total of 232 cygnets have fledged in the watershed during this project.

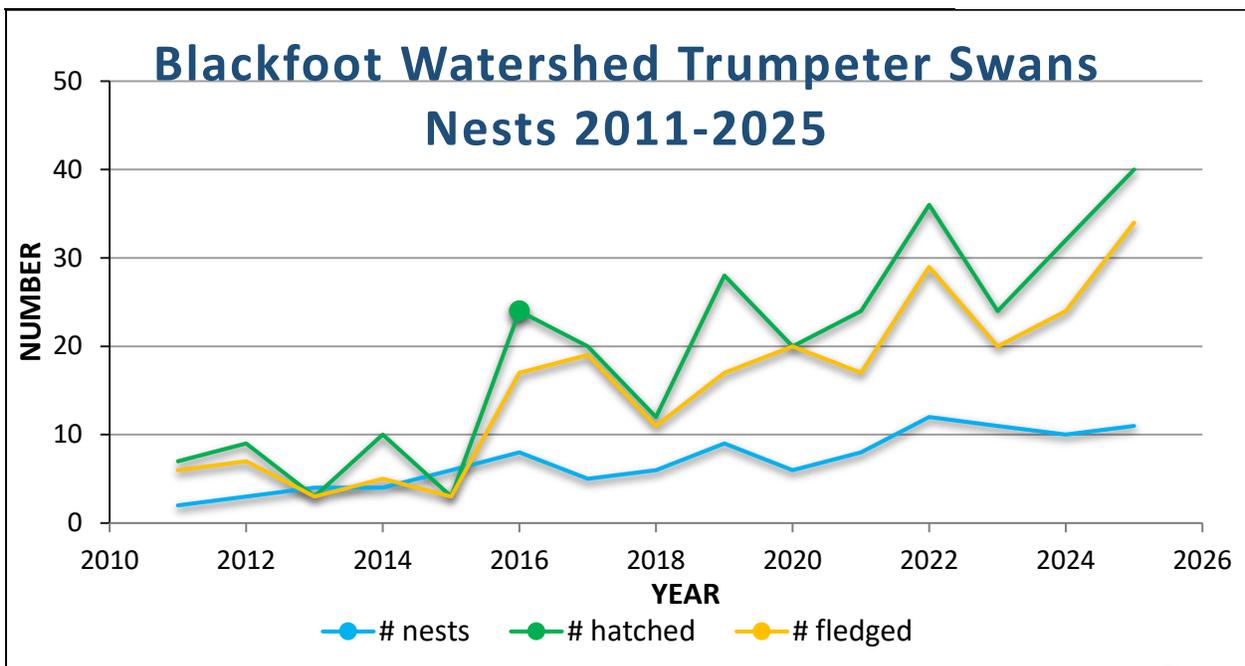
The geographical range of territories expanded over time, with pairs establishing territories farther north in the Clearwater drainage. In 2019, an unmarked pair nested for the first known time in the upper Swan Valley, and in 2021 a second pair nested in the upper Swan. One of the second pair is collared: T61. T61 is from the Mission Valley project, and was sighted with a Blackfoot released bird, 8V1, in the spring of 2020. It has not been confirmed if the current mate of T61 is 8V1. Both nests have been successful every year since inception. At least two Blackfoot TRUS have nested far from the watershed. Female 7A8, released in the Blackfoot in 2012, nested in Kimberly, British Columbia in 2016. And 3A6, released in the Blackfoot in 2016, has nested successfully in Sheridan, Wyoming since 2023.

Although cygnet production has continued to increase, the numbers of occupied territories and nests seem to have leveled off. Some territories have been occupied and had successful nests, only to be apparently abandoned in subsequent years. With most birds no longer marked, ascertaining the reason for this is difficult. However, we do know that in addition to the two swans known to nest in other areas, others have been sighted far outside of the Blackfoot and it's very possible that a significant number of trumpeters released or hatched in the watershed are simply going elsewhere in subsequent years. Although we've seen little evidence of mortality of white birds within the watershed since the early years of the restoration project, mortality during migration and/or wintering could also be a factor in the apparent slowdown of expansion in active nests.

Table 2. Numbers of known Trumpeter Swan nests and cygnets in the Blackfoot Watershed 2010-2025.

Year	Active nests	Successful nests	Hatched	Fledged
2010				
2011	2	2	7	6
2012	3	2	9	7
2013	4	1	3	3
2014	4	3	10	5
2015	6	2	3	3
2016	8	6	24	17
2017	5	5	20	19

2018	6	6	12	11
2019	9	8	28	17
2020	6	5	20	20
2021	8	7	24	17
2022	12	9	36	29
2023	11	10	24	20
2024	10	8	32	24
2025	11	11	40	34
<b>All Years</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>232</b>



### Migration and Wintering Locations

Most winter sightings of swans released in the Blackfoot have been in southwestern Montana and southeastern Idaho (Figure 2). Most marked wintering swans (21 individuals) have been sighted in the Ruby River valley near the town of Sheridan, just a little over 100 k from the Blackfoot. The longest movement confirmed was that of Swan 6A5, which was observed in the early spring of 2012 on the Colorado River near the town of Blythe in southern California.

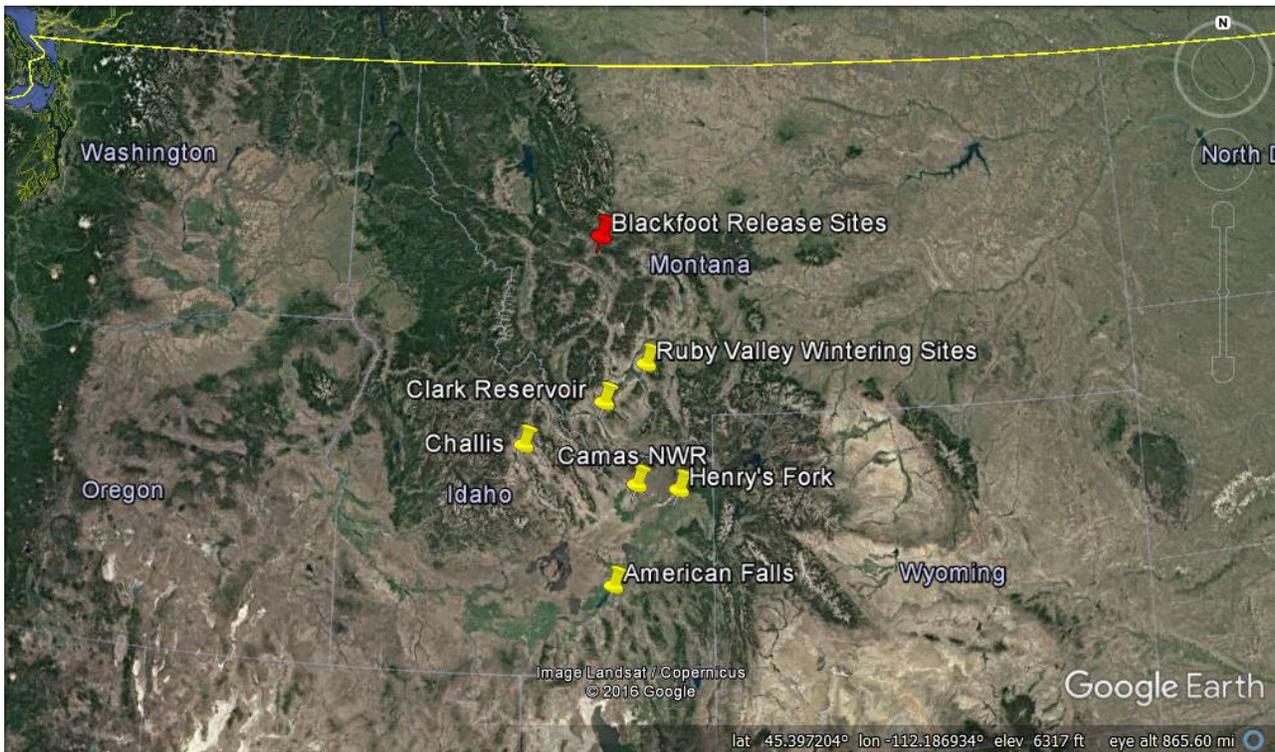


Figure 1 Primary winter locations of Trumpeter Swans released in the Blackfoot Watershed 2005-2020.

### Movements tracked by GPS

In July 2020 two non-nesting adult Blackfoot swans at different molting sites (Colburn Pond and Doney Reservoir) were captured and fitted with GPS collars. The Doney swan was a recapture of Blackfoot swan 2A8. 2A8 was released in 2014 and identified as male. 2A8 subsequently replaced an unmarked female as mate to male 6A6. She incubated and they successfully hatched young in 2018 and 2019, although the cygnets from 2019 were lost shortly after hatching. In 2020, 2A8 returned from migration with a different male, 1V7, who was released as a yearling in 2018. The Colburn swan, previously unmarked, was marked with collar GPS MT-10.

GPS data from 2A8 and GPS MT-10 show use of a wide range of wetland sites in the Blackfoot Valley during the summer and fall of 2020 (Figure 3).

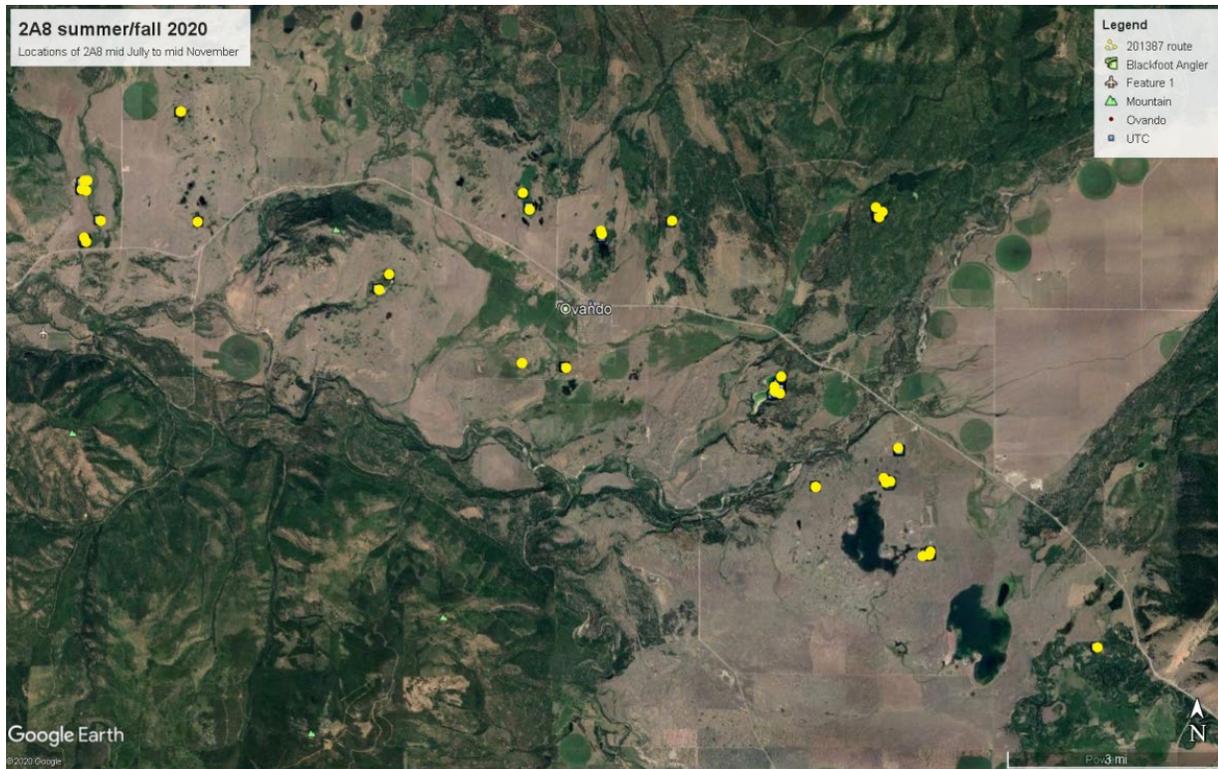


Figure 2- 2A8 GPS locations in summer and fall 2020.

Swan MT-10 flew 126 miles to Alder, MT on 10/26, following an early snowstorm, and remained in that area through the end of 2020. She spent much of that time in the tailing ponds near Alder. 2A8 migrated from the Blackfoot on 11/14. She flew to Ennis Lake and spent two and a half weeks there, and on 12/1 flew to the Henry's Fork of the Snake River, near Island Park in southeast Idaho. She was there through the end of 2020.