

The delicate job of transplanting the trumpeter swan

HARRIMAN STATE PARK, Idaho — The trumpeter swan, a 25-pound adult female, was quiet as she was banded, tagged and checked for gender. She protested just once, flailing her legs as she was flipped onto her back to have the underside of her tail marked with a bright yellow dye.

Trapped in the morning at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Montana, tagged at Harriman in Idaho and shipped that night to the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in southeastern Idaho, this swan is part of an aggressive bid to move hundreds of scarce trumpeters out of the western fringes of the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

Among all the uncertainties about this unique swan-capture program, there is one overriding danger: If the swans are left to winter in Harriman, they will run out of food and hundreds will die, some within a matter of weeks.

"The odds of them being alive at the end of the winter are not very high," said Ruth Shea, an Idaho Department of Fish and Game regional biologist who has tracked the Yellowstone trumpeter for 14 years. "This is not the normal way you would do range expansion."

Instead, it's an emergency rescue. Faced with a shrinking food supply at Harriman, biologists realized last August that the only hope was to move as many trumpeters as possible before winter.

When trapping got under way in mid-November, more than 300 swans were already at Harriman, said park manager Gene Eyraud. By late November 70 swans had been moved. But as winter unfolds, more swans are expected to arrive at Harriman and Red Rock Lakes, and trappers will be even busier. Last winter more than 700 swans wintered at the refuge — one-third of the wintering population in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

There is only enough aquatic

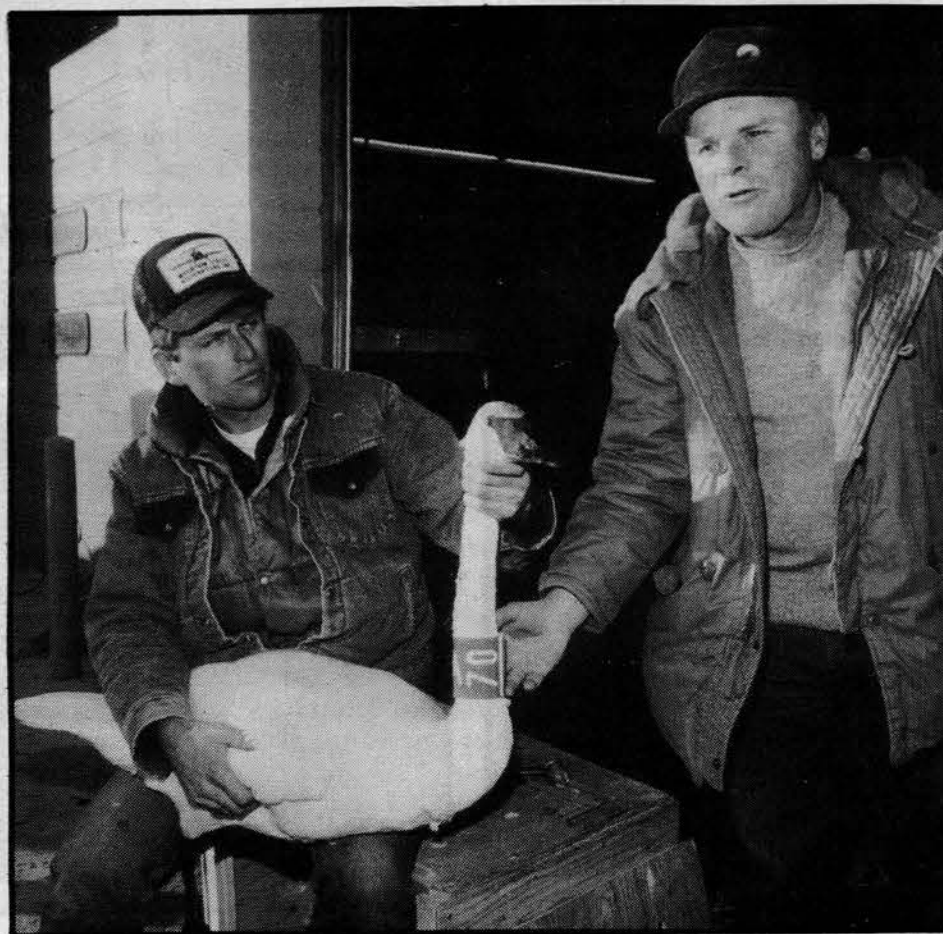
vegetation at Harriman this year to support an estimated 100 swans. The vegetation is the winter staple for swans, which eat 20 pounds per bird per day, but state biologists say there is only about one-fourth the normal growth. One possible cause, they say, is severe overgrazing by the increasing number of birds living in Yellowstone and wintering at Harriman.

Trumpeter swans once ranged throughout North America, wintering in places like Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Today two populations survive. The Rocky Mountain population numbers about 2,000 and winters in Yellowstone, and the Canadian-Alaskan population numbers about 12,000 and winters along the Washington coast. Earlier this year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service turned down a petition to list the Yellowstone population of the rare bird as a threatened species.

Eventually, Idaho biologist Ruth Shea would like to see the Yellowstone swans transplanted as far as the Midwest. But the dozen federal and state agencies involved in this year's trumpeter transplant didn't have time to put together such an ambitious plan. For now, the swans will be moved to six warmer locations in southern Idaho, Utah and Wyoming.

Winter is a risky season for the trumpeter, North America's largest waterfowl species. Two years ago, low water flows combined with bitter cold to cause the Henry's Fork of the Snake River to freeze at Harriman. More than 100 swans died.

Trappers don't know the best way to catch swans in the winter; it's never been done before. So far, the most effective method has been "spotlighting." Wearing a football helmet with an attached light powered by a loud generator, a biologist floats the river late at night to approach a trumpeter at close range. The light and noise stun the swan,



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Kent Clegg (left) and Rod Drewlen with a tagged trumpeter swan

which is then collected in a salmon net.

This method only works during about half of the lunar cycle. When the skies are clear and the moon is bright, swans can see trappers long before they get in range. The birds then fly away.

Biologists don't know how the birds will react to new winter range, or if they'll return to Harriman. One swan, released at Bruneau Dunes, returned to Harriman within four days.

"It may not be a total negative," Shea said. "That bird now knows a whole lot of habitat 250 miles south of here."

Biologists say it will be tough to break older swans of the habit of wintering in

Harriman. They are more optimistic about retraining cygnets and young adult swans.

So far, the captured swans appear to be in good physical shape, but many trumpeters may still die, and this prospect puts Harriman park officials in a delicate spot. The wintering swans are a popular attraction for cross-country skiers and photographers, who will not like the sight of dying and dead birds.

"We knew the public would fry us if we didn't do anything," said Harriman's Eyraud. "It's been a generally well-received program so far, but we knew we had to handle it right."

— Kevin Richert

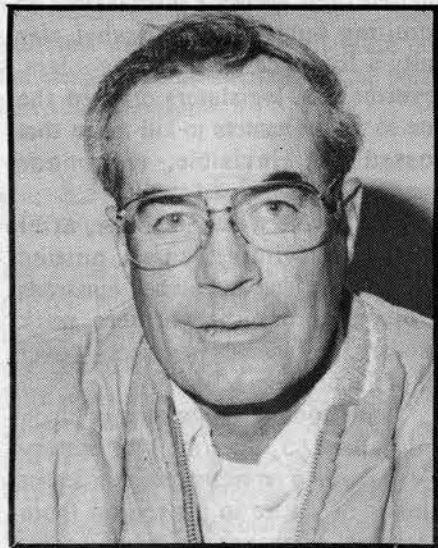
'Son of Sagebrush Rebellion' is now playing in Nevada

CARSON CITY, Nev. — Widespread reports of the resurrection of the Sagebrush Rebellion are greatly exaggerated. So says a founder of the movement, Nevada rancher and state senator Dean Rhoads. But read on.

Word of a "revival" of the Sagebrush Rebellion spread rapidly around the West in December when 40 conservative Republicans gathered behind closed doors in Las Vegas to plot ways to take control of regional development away from "conservationists" and the administration of the self-proclaimed "environmental president," George Bush.

Westerners are once again "irritated and disenchanted" with federal policy on public lands, said Rhoads, "but there is no organized effort to recreate the Sagebrush Rebellion." The new revolt, however, represents a "broad coalition with more support than the Sagebrush Rebellion ever had," he said.

The first shots in the original Sagebrush Rebellion were fired in 1979 from the Nevada state capitol in Carson City when Rhoads sponsored legislation calling on the United States government to turn control of Western public lands over to the states. The Sagebrush Rebels argued that Western states entered the Union on an unequal footing when the federal government took control of the vast public domain in the West. Federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service, today govern about 80 percent of the region's land. As the rebellion caught fire, similar bills were passed by five



Dean Rhoads

other Western state legislatures.

While ranchers were the main firebrands in the Sagebrush Rebellion, Rhoads said he was the only rancher at recent meetings of the Western States Caucus, the group that is carrying the torch of the movement's resurgence. Made up of conservative Republicans, the caucus was formed in the late 1970s to support Ronald Reagan's run for the presidency. Reagan was the titular head of the group while he was president, and many of the original rebels became political insiders during his administration. But the movement's leaders now feel betrayed by President Bush. Rhoads compares the Bush regime to the Carter presidency.

Meanwhile, urban politicians have largely replaced ranchers and hardrock

miners in the new Western revolt. The current chairman of the Western States Caucus is Albert Ouellette, a Republican activist from Denver who moved to Washington two years ago to set up his own lobbying business.

"We're far broader than the Sagebrush Rebellion," said Ouellette, who claims support among Western lawmakers, mining and timber industry executives, recreation businesses, and elected officials in towns hemmed in by public lands and limited water supplies.

Ouellette said many conservative Westerners are upset by Bush administration actions. These include the appointment of an environmentalist, William Reilly, to head the Environmental Protection Agency, pledges of "no net loss" of wetlands, support for protecting the spotted owl in Northwest timberlands and the veto by Reilly of the proposed Two Forks dam near Denver.

"The White House doesn't seem to be paying attention to the problems in the West as far as land use, jobs, mining, water and the environment," said Ouellette. "We're not happy with the way Bush has allowed these problems to develop without an equitable solution."

Western conservatives feel hampered by recent decisions reflecting the growing strength of the nationwide environmental movement. And despite the defeat of numerous environmental measures on November ballots, they are still fearful of the future.

Western ranchers narrowly escaped a

500-percent increase in public-land grazing fees in the last Congress. And miners face an increasingly powerful effort to reform the controversial 1872 Mining Law, which virtually guarantees low-cost access to mineral lodes on public lands.

Many of these battles pit representatives from Eastern states against Westerners, especially in the Senate. The Western States Caucus announced its resurgence in mid-December letters to President Bush and Western Republican senators. The letters called for "defining Western problems and needs from the West and not the East."

"People in the East who impose restrictions and pass laws have no idea of the effect on people," said Ouellette. "We need to be more effective politically and economically to control our own future."

Topping the new agenda of the Western States Caucus is an effort to draw the line in the U.S. Senate, the last redoubt of conservative Western representatives at the national level. But Ouellette said the Western States Caucus also will be a sounding board for 1992 presidential hopefuls — perhaps even a challenger to Bush.

Despite the clear efforts to distance itself from the Sagebrush Rebellion, the new Western conservative revolt is still harkening to the past. The first public meeting of the rejuvenated Western States Caucus will be a "Ronald Reagan Reunion" in Los Angeles early in 1991 to raise seed money.

— Jon Christensen