

# Swan & Goose Identification

**It's Important to Know**



**Reports** from wildlife watchers and sportsmen help wildlife biologists to better understand swan population trends, habitat use, and provide better management for trumpeter (*Cygnus buccinator*) and tundra swans (*C. columbianus*). Positive identification is important, as trumpeters often mix with flocks of the relatively common tundra (whistling) swans throughout their migration and winter range.

The mute swan (*C. olor*) is an introduced Eurasian species that occurs in North America both in captive aviculture collections and in the wild primarily along the east coast, Great Lakes and in other limited areas of the United States and Western British Columbia. It is included here for clarification in those areas where it occurs with our native trumpeter and tundra swans. In Washington State it is important to report all mute swan sightings.

**VOICE**

Some of the best ways to spot differences between the five species are calls: an absolute method of species identification.

**Trumpeter:** resonant, sonorous, loud, low-pitched, bugle like call.

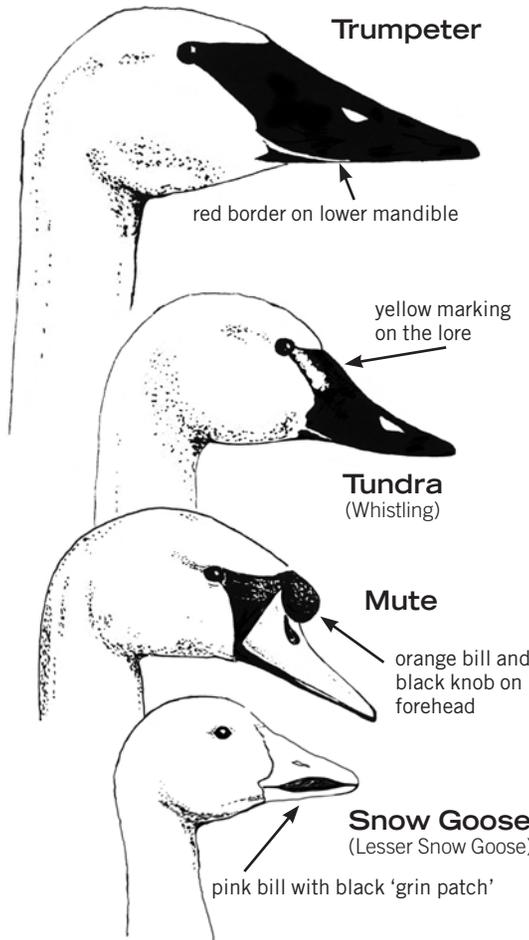
**Tundra:** high pitched often quavering oo-oo-oo accentuated in the middle; or who, who-ho: woo-oo-woo; or who-who.

**Mute:** generally silent but not 'mute'; hissing sounds are common and occasional snorting noises.

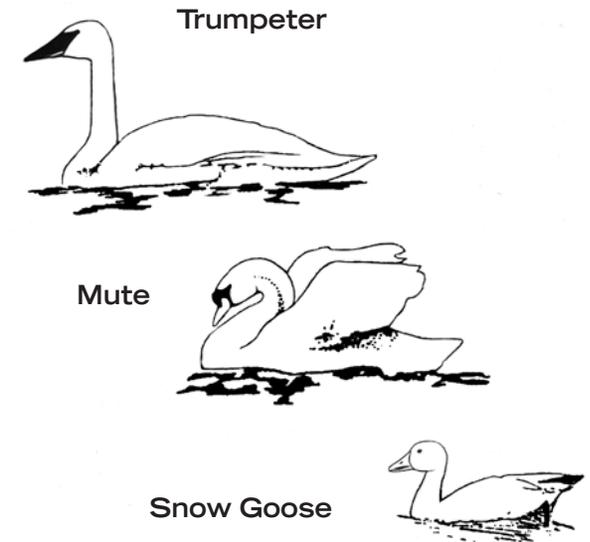
**Canada Geese:** Ha-lonk, ha-lonk

**Snow geese:** high pitched awu-unk, awu-unk and kuk, kuk

**Head Profiles**



**Trumpeters**, afloat, on shore, resting, or in a mild state of alertness, generally have the neck kinked back at the base so that it appears to rise from the forepart of the back forming a reverse angular C-shape (swimming swan) rather than from the very front of the body as in tundra swans. When in a state of alertness, trumpeters hold their bodies at an angle as compared to tundra's which are held horizontal (standing swan). In general, body postures of trumpeters are angular and tundra postures are curved or round. **Mutes** generally hold the neck curved gracefully and bill pointed somewhat downward. Wings may be arched over back giving a bulky appearance. Also, note size comparison – especially the length of neck – between swans and geese. See flying, standing, and swimming graphics throughout this brochure.

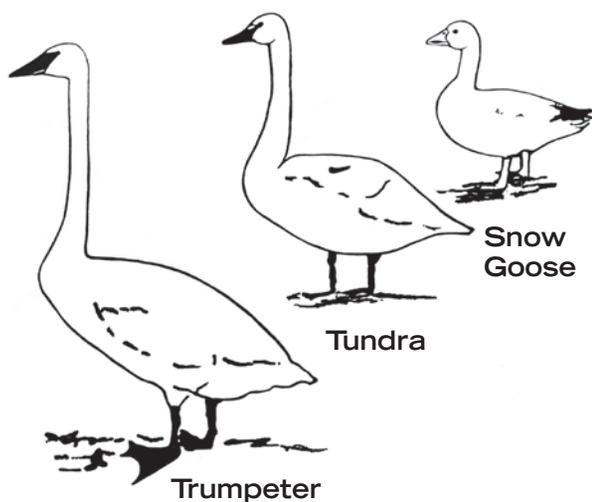


## Proportions of the neck to body length

**Trumpeter** swans have longer necks in proportion to their body lengths than do **tundras**. There is no standard ratio formula, but this is a noticeable characteristic when the birds are either standing or swimming. It is not reliable in flight.

### Size Information

	Wing Span	Weight	Length
<b>Trumpeter</b>	84-100 in.	21-30 lbs.	60 in.
<b>Tundra</b>	72-80 in.	13-18 lbs.	52 in.
<b>Mute</b>	82-94 in.	20-30 lbs.	57 in.
<b>Snow Goose</b>	48-54 in.	4-7 lbs.	27 in.



### Trumpeter Swan

(no black primary feathers)



### American White Pelican

(black primary/secondary feathers; neck folded back in flight)

### Snow Goose

(black primary feathers, short neck)

## Flight Profiles and Takeoff Behavior

**Trumpeter** swans, following the takeoff run and just as they become airborne, will pull their necks into a shallow “S” curve. This is seen only for a very brief time during their first wing beats to stay airborne.

**Tundra** swans hold their necks straight the entire time of the takeoff run and initial flight. This characteristic applies to both land and water takeoffs.

**Note the differences** in size and color between swans, snow geese and white pelicans. **Swans** are large all-white (adults) or gray (juvenile) birds with a wing span of 6 to 8 feet. **Snow geese** of all ages have black wing tips and a wing span of about 4½ feet. **White Pelicans** have black primary and secondary feathers and wing’s trailing edge, and a wing span of 8 to 11 feet. Their bills are long, prominent, and yellow-orange in color.

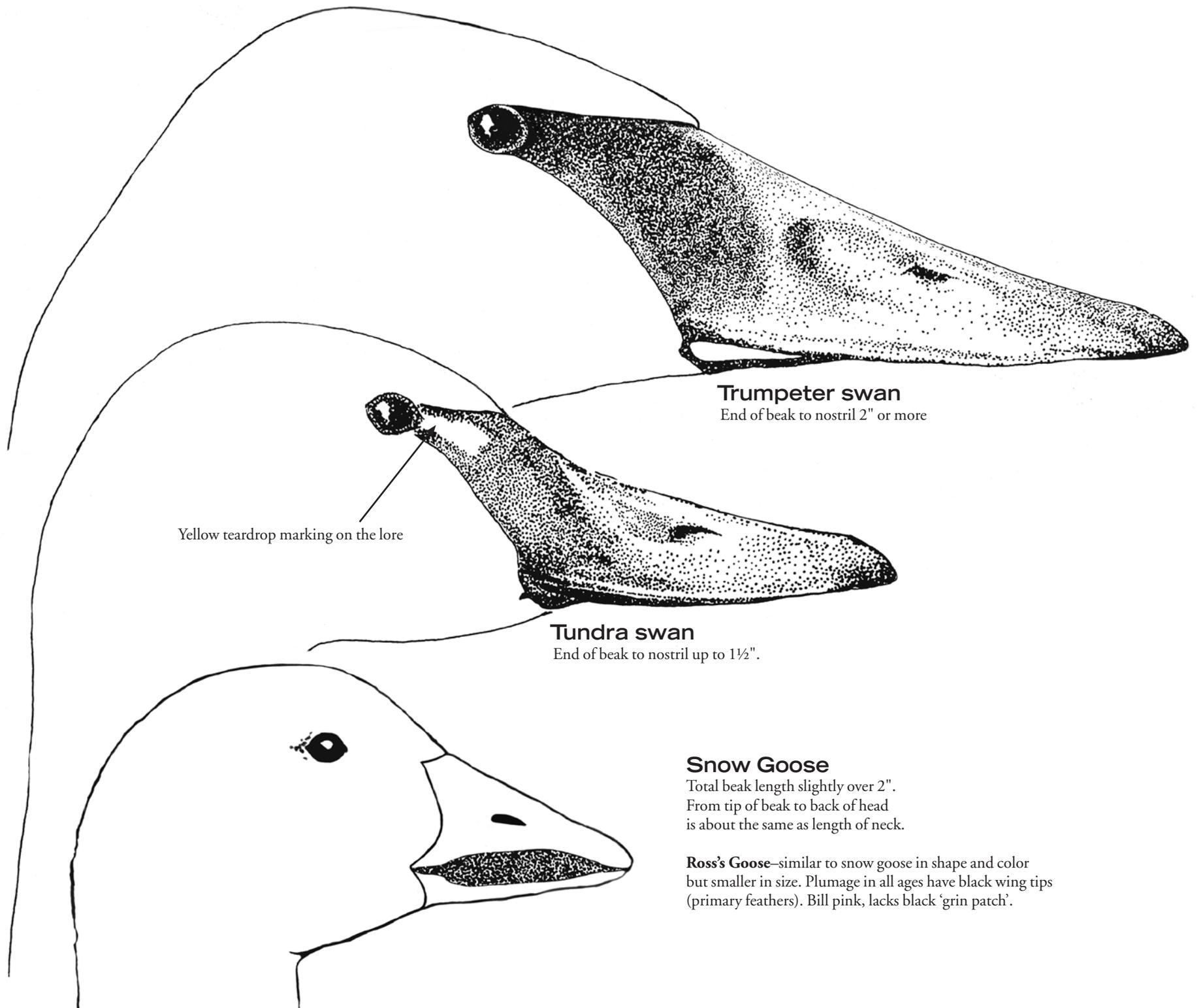
**Canada Goose**—black neck and head with a white cheek patch; dark body in varying shades of gray-brown with the rear ⅓ being white. The tail is black. They have a short neck, and a flight pattern similar to snow geese.

**American White Pelican**—All white with black primary and secondary feathers that extend along the trailing edge of wing. Black on wings visible only in flight. Bill is very large and long. Both bill, legs and feet are vivid yellow-orange. Males have a flattened bill “horn” on top, Neck folded back in flight. Often fly in flocks. Size: average 11-20 lbs Wing span: 8-11 feet

### IMPORTANT

**Marked and Banded Swans and Snow Geese**—Some swans are marked with identifying neck bands. Please note the collar color and any number or letters as well as the date observed and location. Report band sightings to Bird Banding Lab: [www.reportband.gov](http://www.reportband.gov).

**For more information on swans or for additional copies of this identification brochure, contact the NWSA.**



Yellow teardrop marking on the lore

**Trumpeter swan**

End of beak to nostril 2" or more

**Tundra swan**

End of beak to nostril up to 1½".

**Snow Goose**

Total beak length slightly over 2".  
From tip of beak to back of head  
is about the same as length of neck.

**Ross's Goose**—similar to snow goose in shape and color  
but smaller in size. Plumage in all ages have black wing tips  
(primary feathers). Bill pink, lacks black 'grin patch'.

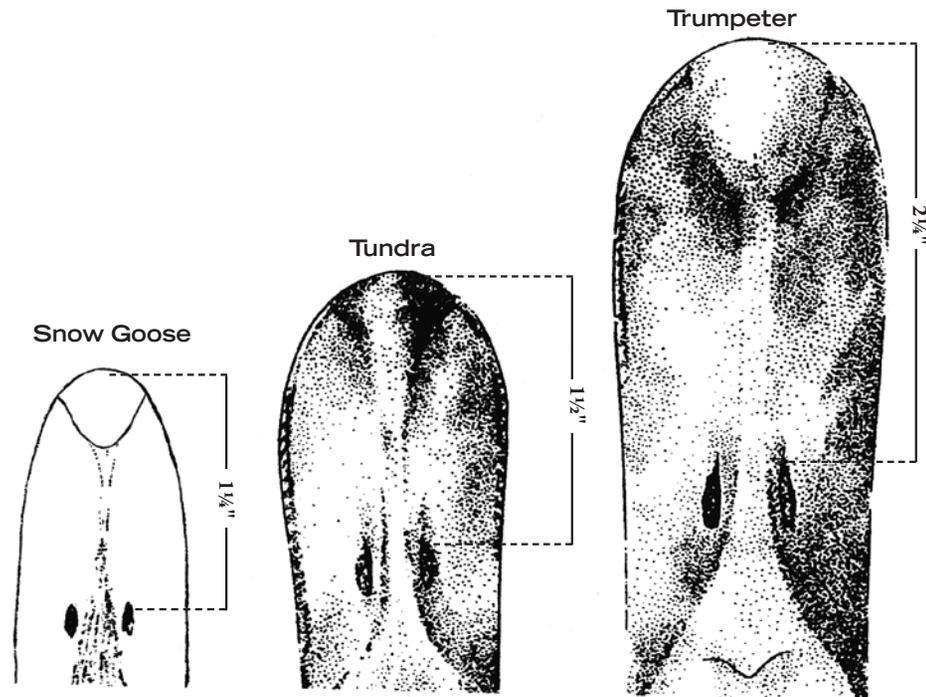
## ●●● Bill Color

**Trumpeter**—black bill with red border on lower mandible; the red border may be present on some tundras.

**Tundra**—black bill, usually with yellow spot of varying size in front of eye; this spot may be absent on some tundras.

**Mute**—orange with prominent black knob at the base.

**Snow Goose**—bill shorter than swans, dark pink with black 'grin patch'.



## Head and Neck Movement

**Trumpeter** swans frequently bob their head and necks up and down (head bobbing). With this motion they also have a variety of vocalizations. This combined activity apparently serves as a form of communication between individuals and within the group. Head bobbing and vocalization activity increase when the birds are disturbed and reaches maximum intensity just prior to the birds taking flight. This behavior may be brief or absent if the birds are suddenly startled and take flight.

**Tundra** swans do not bob their head and neck in this manner. Occasionally tundra's will nod only their head up and down. There is no defined preflight display as in the trumpeter. While vocalizing they may hold their head and neck out at a 45° angle.

## Head and Bill Shape

**Trumpeter**—bill heavy in proportion to head with a straight profile. Angular head shape somewhat resembling canvasback duck. Eye not distinct from bill.

**Tundra**—bill more dish-shaped in profile, bill smaller in proportion to head compared to trumpeter. Head smoothly rounded; eye usually distinct from bill.

The shape of the head profile may vary between individual birds. Tundra swans especially, have a wide range of head-bill shapes, some having very obvious concave bills, while others appear straighter. Look carefully at the eye area for any yellow on the lore and to see if the eye is distinct from the bill.

**Snow Goose**—less than one-half the size of a swan; total bill length is about 2"; bill is shorter compared to head length than in swans; bill does not extend very close to eye. Neck length is about the same length and distance from tip of bill to back of head.

**Juvenile Identification**—both *Trumpeter* and *Tundra* juveniles have a gray body coloration. *Tundra* juveniles are brighter silvery gray with black legs and feet. *Trumpeters* are darker sooty gray, especially in the head and neck area, leg and foot color is primarily yellow-orange mottling with some black. From late December on, *Tundra* juveniles begin turning white and by mid March are nearly all white. *Trumpeters* remain dark gray. *Tundra* bill color is usually mottled pink with black tip; *Trumpeters* are black at base and tip with a pink middle. Bill color late in the season gradually fades from pink with black borders to all black in both species.

*Mute* juvenile plumage white with brownish splotches; bill gray with black base. Legs and feet are black.

*Snow goose* juveniles are gray with black wing tips. Bills are grayish in color.

## CAUTION

**Exercise caution and respect while watching and photographing wildlife**—For species like trumpeter and tundra swans and snow geese, continual disturbance during the critical months (winter and spring) can lead to increased deaths from stress-induced disease and can result in nesting failure on northern breeding grounds. Please leave feeding and resting birds alone.

**Stay in your car**—it is an excellent observation and photographic blind.

**Move slowly and quietly**—when you do get out to watch the birds carside, or hike, bike, in a boat, canoe or kayak.

**Use binoculars, spotting scopes and telephoto lenses**—they allow you to sneak up on wildlife without leaving your car or disturbing their normal activities.

**Respect private property**—do not trespass onto farm fields or other private property to 'get a closer look'.

**NOTE** **Sportsmen** please exercise caution while hunting snow and Canada geese. Swans and American white pelicans may mix with these geese and in the excitement of the hunt, shooting mistakes can occur. Trumpeter and Tundra swans are protected in Washington and many other states.

**Use Non-toxic shot while hunting.**

**Please report swan sightings to:**

**Northwest Swan Conservation Association**

914 – 164<sup>th</sup> St. SE • PMB 272

Mill Creek, WA 98012 • phone: 425-787-0258

swaninfo@nswswans.org    www.nswswans.org