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Tom Hinz of the Montana Wetlands Legacy carries a trumpeter swan to be prepared for transport during Friday's swan round-up at the Boyles Hill Pond. Forty-four birds were shipped to nearby states as part of an ongoing project to increase the genetic diversity of the species in the Rocky Mountain region.

Swan send-off

44 Jackson-raised trumpeters sent to Idaho, Montana and Oregon.

By Cory Hatch

On the road near Boyles Hill Pond, Wyoming Wetlands Society Executive Director Drew Reed paces anxiously back and forth Friday, motioning for silence and waving people behind trees and parked cars.

Eight kayaks glide slowly across the lake toward a group of trumpeter swans clustered at the far side of the pond. An errant cell phone rings, and the crowd cringes.

There's only one chance to get the roughly 60 swans safely into a fenced enclosure near the road. Even though each has a wing clipped to prevent

it from flying, there could still be a rodeo.

"If we blow this up on the first attempt, we're all going to be swimming for birds," Reed whispers.

As the kayakers get close to the flock, they form a semi-circle phalanx and begin to herd the swans back toward the enclosure. Honking and flapping, one goose separates from the flock, but a kayaker maneuvers him back in line.

The silence holds; the swans behave. One gets stuck in the fence, and Reed runs over and gingerly untangles the wire and feathers. Another makes a dramatic escape, and joins a flock of Canada geese across the pond, but it, too, is recovered without incident.



Janene Lichtenberg, a volunteer from the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes, holds tightly to a swan as it is banded. Twenty of the swans that were rounded up Friday were sent to wetlands areas on the tribes' Flathead Reservation in Montana.

Once the gate is closed, the tricky part is over. Volunteers and wildlife watchers begin to inch their way to the holding pen, where officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Wyoming Wetlands Society begin to set up the infrastructure necessary to tag the swans and test them for diseases.

Once the processing is complete, volunteers load 44 trumpeter swans – the rest are resident birds that stay at Boyles Hill Pond – into horse trailers and ship them to unoccupied habitat around the region.

Twenty swans will go to the Salish-Kootenai reservation in northwest Montana, 10 to the Blackfoot Valley, ten to the Fort Hall area in Idaho and four to a pilot release program in Oregon.

The swan roundup is the latest effort to reintroduce to

the wild a species that once covered the entire northern half of the lower 48 states from the Pacific Coast to Great Lakes. By the early 1900s, the demand for the animals' feathers, meat, eggs and skin pushed the species almost to extinction. By 1932, wildlife managers knew of fewer than 70 swans near Yellowstone National Park.

While the species has since begun to rebound, Reed says that the population suffers from inbreeding.

"The population went through a genetic bottleneck," he says. "Their numbers got so low that eventually it became a population of very closely related individuals breeding."

The problem prompted the Wyoming Wetlands Society to start a three-year program to gather eggs from nests in Canada, hatch and raise them

at Boyles Hill Pond and other valley locations and then spread the birds throughout the Rockies.

"The Canadian egg project began to increase the number of individuals for release and to increase that genetic diversity, specifically in the Rocky Mountain population," Reed says.

This year's roundup includes birds from the second year of the egg project as well as from resident pairs around Jackson Hole. While Reed encourages people to come out and look at the resident swans at Boyles Hill Pond, he asks wildlife watchers to keep their distance.

"Under no circumstances should food or other objects be thrown into the enclosure," he says. "Once these birds are released, their best chance for survival is to be scared of humans."



Katie Barnes, a veterinarian at Jackson's Spring Creek Animal Hospital, draws blood from a captive swan's foot to be tested for pullorum, a type of salmonella.