

# Baltimore Sun



## Getting back to nature

**Journey: Months after being rescued from an oil pit in Alaska, a tundra swan is returned to her own kind in Maryland.**

By Chris Guy  
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December 4, 2003 -- ROCK HALL - Researchers released a young tundra swan at an Eastern Shore wildlife refuge near here yesterday, beginning what they hope will become a 3,000-mile migration to the frigid sub-Arctic landscape where she was born.

The bird, which was rescued last summer after landing in an oil impoundment pit at Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, has already spent most of her life in the company of well-meaning humans. While undergoing treatment in Alaska, the swan was left behind when her parents and 70,000 to 90,000 other swans began their annual journey south.

Since September, the swan has been cared for at the Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research Center in Delaware. Researchers there, along with others from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, have been involved in the rescue of the swan.

The tricky part now, say the benefactors who released her at the Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge, is whether the juvenile swan, known as a cygnet, will mingle with the thousands of her kind that make the upper Chesapeake Bay a vital stopover before wintering in the Carolinas. Ultimately, the bird must learn to migrate to the species' summer breeding ground the only way she can - by mimicking the behavior of older birds.

In an experiment that sounds like something out of the movie *Fly Away Home*, the swan was outfitted with an identity tag around her leg and a satellite transmitter around her neck. Trackers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will receive a signal every three days for up to 18 months, pinpointing the swan's location and perhaps giving vital clues to the behavior and movements of other swans.

"The swan doesn't have parents to lead it, and it remains to be seen whether another group of swans will adopt it," said Larry Hindman, who heads a DNR waterfowl project. "It might be a struggle without parents, but my guess is this bird will do what the other swans do while they're here."

## Research opportunity

Hindman outfitted the 16-pound bird yesterday, expertly tucking its head and long neck beneath its wings to install the tracking device. He was the one who determined the swan is female, a surprise to rescuers. A veteran of state monitoring of Canada geese populations, Hindman is also Maryland's representative on a three-year tundra swan research project coordinated at Cornell University. Yesterday's release, he said, is the first project involving a rehabilitated tundra swan, and it could provide valuable information to the Cornell project. Tracking the swan will cost about \$10,000, including the rental of satellite time, said Meg Walkup, a refuge spokeswoman. Some of those costs will be paid by corporate donors, she said.

The bird's unlikely journey began when she was treated at the **International Bird Rescue Research Center in Anchorage**. When rescuers realized the swan would not be healthy enough to rejoin migrating swans, she was transferred - with an air freight bill paid by the BP oil company - to Delaware's Tri-State Bird Rescue & Research Center, said Executive Director Christina C. Motoyoshi.

Caretakers at the Newark, Del., rescue center say the swan lived in an artificial pool habitat until she was taken yesterday to the 2,200-acre Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge, at the mouth of the Chester River. The Bay Bridge, Sparrows Point and even downtown Baltimore are easily visible from the refuge, which provides one of the best vantage points on the bay for viewing tundra swans. "We are really the only two similar kinds of rescue centers in the country," Motoyoshi said. "It made sense for the swan to stay with us if we were to make this attempt to reintroduce it to other swans while they are resting and feeding here in the bay.

## Taking off

The bird waddled hesitantly after being released from a plastic animal carrier, slipping occasionally on the sand and mud of a low tide. Calling twice, then listening to the telltale whistle of other swans that were feeding on submerged vegetation and small clams about 200 yards offshore, the swan took a few ungainly steps before opening her 6-foot wingspan and flying toward the other birds.

The swan's handlers - who bucked professional etiquette by naming the creature T.R., after former president Theodore Roosevelt, who founded the national wildlife refuge system - worried that the swan had become attached or "habituated" to humans, but the grayish-white bird never looked back.

Until the moment the swan lifted above the water, her rescuers were not sure she had learned to fly before being injured in Alaska.

"Right now, we only have maybe 200 to 300 [tundra swans], but with this strong northwest wind, we could soon see lots more coming," said Walkup, the refuge spokeswoman. "We should have about 4,000 of them here at the peak, before they move on farther south. Hopefully, this swan will be accepted and will migrate with the others."

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