

Konrad Schmidt's "The Tail End"

~~~~~ Robot - Reared Swans

For more than two decades, I have collected, surveyed, and simply watched fish from Alaska to Florida. In all those years and all those places, I have had a few memorable experiences which really stand out. Some directly involve fish while others are encounters with wildlife and people.

One really nice bonus which has enhanced my collecting over the years is encountering other rare species besides fish. Even though these animals usually keep their distance—like bald eagles soaring over a river valley, or a pack of timber wolves serenading at night from somewhere deep in the forest—such encounters will always be very special to me.

One time, though, I crossed paths with a couple of characters that violated all the social norms and just wouldn't leave me alone.

In 1992, I was looking for the southern brook lamprey (*Ichthyomyzon gagei*) in the St. Croix River in Minnesota. I drove down to the boat landing and noticed two large birds along the other bank. I could also see brightly colored neck bands which told me they were trumpeter swans. I thought that was rather neat and parked the car. I was using a backpack shocker to pull both the adult and ammocoete lampreys out of the silt, but wasn't paying much attention to the trumpeters.

Suddenly, something big and white cruised up along side me barely three feet away. I almost jumped out of my waders.

After that initial "shock," a second wave of terror swept through me when I realized an endangered species

had just swam through my electric field. I wondered how I could ever explain my way out of a \$10,000 fine, or maybe, simply dispose of the body.

It was a great relief to see that the bird was just fine and now both were sticking to me like glue.

Was there something wrong with these guys, or were trumpeters always this dumb and that's why they almost went extinct like the Dodo bird?

I had found several lampreys and wanted to continue electroshocking. Even though I felt just a little guilty about scaring the swans off—they looked like doleful puppies that had just been scolded—it seemed these balmy birds were staying put out on the middle river.

I was almost finished, when again one of the daring duo cruised up on me from behind, and started feeding with its head underwater—right in the middle of my electroshocker's field! Obviously, their feathers must somehow insulate them from electricity. But since I'm never one to tempt fate, I called it a day.

Before leaving, I wanted a couple of pictures of the swans, and sure enough, they came running when they saw me at the landing. I snapped what were probably the easiest wildlife shots of my entire life. I gave a copy to the Minnesota Nongame Wildlife Program and told them of the swans' strange behavior.

They took one look at the pictures and said, "Oh, these are Wisconsin birds, which they raise with robots to prevent the cygnets (juvenile swans) from imprinting on people. They're very proud of the results."

I'm no expert, but I don't think these birds are getting the message.