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## Mute Swan Position Statement

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Michigan supports three species of swans: Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*; native), Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*; native), and Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*; introduced). These graceful, ivory birds are iconic symbols on shallow lakes, wetlands, slow-moving rivers, and coastlines across the Great Lakes State. While Tundra Swans are limited to spending the winter season in Michigan, Trumpeter Swans are once again regular breeders throughout the spring and summer months. Once completely extirpated from the state due to habitat loss and exploitation for the fashion industry, Trumpeter Swan populations have rebounded following an intensive reintroduction program to save the species from extinction. Now estimated at around 500 individuals in the state, Trumpeter Swans are still considered Threatened in Michigan as habitat loss, displacement, and persecution continue to impact this native species.

Native throughout Europe and Asia, the Mute Swan was introduced to North America in the late 1800s as a decorative addition to estate gardens, ponds, parks, and zoos. Escaped captive birds took readily to shallow lakes and wetlands, coastal wetlands, and slow-moving rivers and populations have experienced rapid growth and expansion ever since. Captive Mute Swans were first brought to Michigan in the early 1900s and as of 2010, the Michigan population of Mute Swans was estimated at over 15,000 individuals.

Wetland habitat loss and degradation is a significant threat to swans and other native Michigan species. Filling and development has resulted in a loss of over 40% of Michigan's original wetlands and those that remain are plagued by over 180 species of aquatic invasive species. These aquatic invaders consume resources at an unsustainable pace, displace native species, and inhibit healthy ecosystem function. While loss of wetland acres is a significant threat, the loss of wetland ecosystem function is also of great concern to Michigan flora, fauna, and citizens, due to wetlands' important role in water quality, flood control, and erosion prevention.

While the economic, environmental, and public health impacts of many aquatic invasive species such as Asian Carp, Zebra Mussel, or Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) are widely acknowledged and managed, similar impacts of Mute Swans must be weighed against the species' aesthetic value to the public. Mute Swans are most often found in more urban habitats than many native waterfowl tolerate. As such, Mute Swans are well-known residents within lakeside communities and public parks. The value that Mute Swans provide by connecting the public to nature deserves acknowledgement.

However, from an ecological perspective, Mute Swans are considered an invasive species in Michigan and their negative environmental impacts cannot be disregarded. The species' capacity for consuming upwards of 8 pounds of aquatic vegetation per day while also dislodging an equal or greater amount, causes substantial damage to wetland habitats, reduces native floral diversity, and can decimate vegetation beyond the point where it can regenerate. Damage to wetland vegetation has significant impacts on sensitive wetland-dependent bird species of conservation concern, including the Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*), American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*), and iconic Common Loon (*Gavia immer*). While habitat loss and degradation is driven by many additional, mostly human-caused factors, the impact of Mute Swans on native vegetation and birds is a known contributing factor.

In addition to the physical degradation of wetland habitat, Mute Swans' highly aggressive behavior often displaces native waterfowl. Although not always the case, Mute Swans frequently exhibit high levels of territorial aggression toward native swans, other native waterfowl, and humans. Unlike most native waterfowl, Mute Swans are often non-migratory where winter weather conditions allow. Some Mute Swans never leave their nesting grounds or return before other native waterfowl, thus excluding other species from otherwise viable nesting habitat. Although some Mute Swans have tolerated other species nesting nearby, such as Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), most Mute Swans are known to attack, injure, or even kill native waterfowl that near their territory.

When left unchecked, rapid population growth of any species threatens ecological health and the health of that particular species. The Mute Swan is a long-lived species that lacks natural predators. Since their introduction to Michigan, the Mute Swan population has grown from one captive pair to over 15,000 and continues to increase by 9 – 10% each year. Without natural predators, the population will continue to increase until it reaches a point of natural control, possibly disease or starvation. Effective population management in other states has reduced and maintained local Mute Swan populations at more ecologically balanced levels, allowing for aquatic vegetation to recover and native waterfowl to have access to more available nesting and foraging habitat.

The priority for Michigan Audubon is the protection of our state's native birds and native habitats they depend upon. Michigan Audubon supports all efforts to protect and enhance wetland habitat, which includes reducing nutrient loading, preventing development, restoring native floral communities, and managing for invasive species. Michigan Audubon recognizes the Mute Swan as a non-native, invasive species that left unchecked, has the capacity to cause substantial environmental damage to Michigan's native birds and natural communities. In addition, Michigan Audubon acknowledges the value of Mute Swans to the public and their ability to connect people with nature. Given the rapid population growth of Mute Swans and lack of natural predators, strategic humane control of Mute Swans is necessary to help restore ecological balance to protect Michigan's native birds and natural communities. This issue is laden with ethical and ecological considerations, but Michigan Audubon's highest priority is the long-term viability of Michigan's native bird species.

Lethal removal of adult or subadult Mute Swans is the most effective method of population management, resulting in fewer individuals removed over the long-term. Any effort to euthanize or humanely kill Mute Swans must be humane, efficient, respectful, and take all reasonable efforts to minimize distress with human safety being the primary concern. Non-lethal methods of control and addling (shaking) or oiling eggs have proven to be ineffective methods of population control when used as the sole method. Non-lethal or egg treatments are not encouraged, but may be necessary in situations where lethal control is not permitted.

In conclusion, Michigan Audubon supports native birds, natural communities, and invasive species control. In Michigan, the non-native Mute Swan is an invasive species that overexploits wetland vegetation, displaces native bird species, and contributes to wetland ecosystem degradation, all of which are exacerbated by overpopulation. While Michigan Audubon recognizes the aesthetic value Mute Swans bring to the public, this value does not supersede the ecological damage Mute Swans inflict. Michigan Audubon supports humane, lethal removal of adult or subadult Mute Swans to drastically reduce the population to a sustainable level that reduces the pressure on Michigan's natural communities and allows for Michigan's native birds to thrive.