



A FOCUS on
WATERFOWL

Coscoroba Swan
Coscorba coscoroba

THE SYLVAN HEIGHTS WATERFOWL PARK AND ECO-CENTER represents a couple's multi-decade, trans-Atlantic effort to protect waterfowl. The result is the world's largest collection of its kind.

Since Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park and Eco-Center opened its doors to the public in October 2006, more than 15,000 people have visited this educational park tucked into the woods outside Scotland Neck. Visitors stroll on gravel walkways that wind through aviaries bustling with birdlife, including geese, ducks, swans, eiders and some species that the folks at Sylvan Heights refer to as "waterfowl oddities," such as the Cape Barren goose.

With 1,000 birds representing more than 170 species from six continents, the park is home to the world's largest collection of waterfowl, including some of the rarest and most unusual examples. The public section of the park, with its trails, picnic tables and visitor center, is a non-profit venture that is attracting tourists to eastern North Carolina. A private section of the park, which is separated from the Eco-Center by a swampy bottomland, contributes to waterfowl conservation on a global scale. Here, a collection of aviaries, enclosures and a cavernous barn house the inner workings of one of the most important waterfowl breeding facilities in the United States.

Written by IDA LYNCH
&
Photographed by MELISSA MCGAW



Northern Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna autumnalis autumnalis

Mike and Ali Lubbock, the owners of Sylvan Heights, are natives of England and Scotland, respectively, who began their lifelong involvement with bird conservation at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust waterfowl center in Slimbridge, England. Sir Peter Scott, a renowned ornithologist and artist, founded the charity organization in 1946, and the group currently operates a network of waterfowl wetland centers throughout the United Kingdom. Mike began interning at the center when he was 17 and in just a few months began to refine his expertise in bird behavior. By the time Ali went to Slimbridge as an intern and met her future husband, he was working as a full-time staff member.

The couple moved to the United States 25 years ago and formed a partnership with an American friend to open a waterfowl breeding center in Sylva. The mountainous location inspired the center's name: Sylvan Heights. They operated the center for five years, but when their partner died, friends of the Lubbocks from Scotland Neck suggested they relocate to rural eastern North Carolina. Noting that "an Englishman doesn't like being far from the coast," Mike felt that the move to the Coastal Plain's warmer location would be beneficial for their avian charges, as the climate is moderate enough to accommodate both northern and southern species.

After an arduous move, which involved transporting 14 miles of chain-link fence as well as hundreds of birds, the Lubbocks settled in Scotland Neck in 1989. They struggled financially for the first five or six years in their new location until the Bronx Zoo stepped in with financial assistance. Later, William Conway, director at the Bronx Zoo, approached the director of the North Carolina Zoo, which ultimately became a partner of the center and helped them raise \$1.5 million to build the public portion of the facility, which continues to expand. Thanks to the N.C. Zoo Society, Sylvan Heights is now a nonprofit organization in its own right.

A UNIQUE FOCUS

Although captive breeding programs for rare mammals such as pandas and rhinos have a lot of visibility in the zoo community, few institutions focus on breeding



Hawaiian Goose (Nene)
Branta sandvicensis



White-faced Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna viduata



Lesser Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna javanica



Fulvous Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna bicolor



Cape Barren Goose
Cereopsis novaehollandiae



Tundra Swan
Cygnus columbianus

waterfowl. Driven by a conservation mission of helping ensure the survival of rare waterfowl species in the wild and in zoological and private collections, Mike has traveled around the world building conservation partnerships and collecting specimens of the world's rarest waterfowl species.

A typical waterfowl recovery project for Mike might entail traveling to a remote rainforest where he would partner with conservationists to study the target species in its native habitat and then, in close coordination with the local government, collect eggs to transport to Sylvan Heights. "In the past, when I was working on breeding projects for species that were not found in captivity, I would bring bird eggs back in a portable incubator," he recalls. "I went on my first expedition when I was 23, traveling to Iceland, and since then I've been all over the world for birds."

Once Lubbock transports the eggs to Sylvan Heights, they are carefully shepherded through the breeding facility. Chickens handle the first shift, sitting on the eggs for days at a time in wooden nest boxes. Just before the eggs hatch, the staff places them in carefully monitored incubators. After the eggs hatch, the staff keeps the ducklings in a series of heated enclosures until the birds are large enough to be moved to outside facilities.

Mike's accomplishments include successfully breeding the white-winged wood duck from Asia, the Hawaiian goose or nene, and Spain's white-headed duck. When he discusses his work, his understated manner masks the fact that he has played a key role in the recovery of many species that were on the cusp of extinction.

"My biggest success has been saving the white-headed duck in Spain," he says. One of the rarest stiff-tail duck species in Spain, Asia and Pakistan, this bird maintains a stronghold in the Andalusian wetlands region of Spain. "About 20 years ago there

White-faced Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna viduata





A Laysan duck hatches at Sylvan Heights. From top, a Laysan duck egg, the emerging hatchling, the newborn chick and a fully grown adult (below). Sylvan Heights' efforts to protect the Laysan duck are particularly significant due to the fact that it is one of the most endangered species of birds. With its population relegated to two tiny islands in the Pacific Ocean, the risks of it becoming extinct are significant. Accordingly, Sylvan Heights is interested in expanding the breeding program to help assure its future.

Laysan Duck
Anas laysanensis



Sylvan Heights founders Mike and Ali Lubbock in front of the international waterfowl exhibit.

were only about 22 individuals of this species remaining in all of Spain," he explains. "I traveled there and discovered that olive growers were draining much of the wetland habitats. When the wetlands are drained, reeds and other vegetation the birds nest in dry out, and rats invade the nesting areas and prey on the birds. We worked with landowners and encouraged them to not take water out of these lakes. And with a combination of rearing eggs in captivity, establishing a breeding area in Spain and then releasing birds into the wild, the species made a great comeback. Today there are about 3,000 individuals breeding in Spain."

In a different type of success story, Sylvan Heights is safeguarding 60 individuals of the rare white-winged wood duck, an Asian species that is nicknamed the Spirit Bird for its otherworldly nighttime trumpeting. The species was once abundant in Thailand and Indonesia, but a combination of hunting and destruction of its lowland rainforest habitat has caused the population to plummet by 95 percent since 1990. A biologist who interned at Sylvan Heights is studying the species and estimates that only 300 to 1,000 individuals remain in the wild. Sylvan Heights now owns all of the breeding pairs in the United States, including some that are on loan to other zoos.

AN HONEST EFFORT

The focus of Mike's fieldwork has changed as he has become more involved in habitat conservation projects. "Waterfowl face many threats throughout the world, including introduction of invasive species, lead poisoning, poaching and unregulated hunting, but habitat destruction surpasses them all," he explains. "Many of my efforts are now focused on identifying the threats to rare species and trying to help correct them before there is a need for a reintroduction program. Public education is an important part of any type of wild animal recovery project, and many times this involves native people who are utilizing the animals or the same habitat. Often it is essential to show people that birds are a valuable resource and offer some sort of incentive to native people to conserve them."

In 2006, he spearheaded the creation of the Venezuelan Waterfowl Conservation Project, a cooperative venture among the International Wild Waterfowl Association, the Akron Zoo, Gary and Denise Riggs, and Sylvan Heights. This effort is exploring how to bolster declining waterfowl populations in Venezuela. One potential future project could involve working closely with ranch owners to erect nesting boxes for the rare Orinoco goose.

Sylvan Heights also collaborates on research projects with educational and scientific organizations, including the National Zoo and Conservation Research Center, N.C. State University and the University of North Carolina. In a partnership with a local twist, Sylvan Heights is home to a flock of North American wood ducks. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the staff is studying the flock to see if toxins in the Roanoke River affect the survival rate of young wood ducks.

IF YOU GO

LOCATION

Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park and Eco-Center is located at 4963 U.S. 258, Scotland Neck, N.C. 27874. From Scotland Neck, take U.S. 258/N. Main Street approximately 1 mile. When you see the Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park sign on your left, turn right and follow the blue signs to the Visitor Center.

For more information, call (252) 826-3186 or visit www.shwpark.com.

PARK HOURS AND TICKETS

Sylvan Heights is open Tuesday through Sunday year round.

October to March: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

April to September: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

ADMISSION FEES

Seniors 62+ :\$5

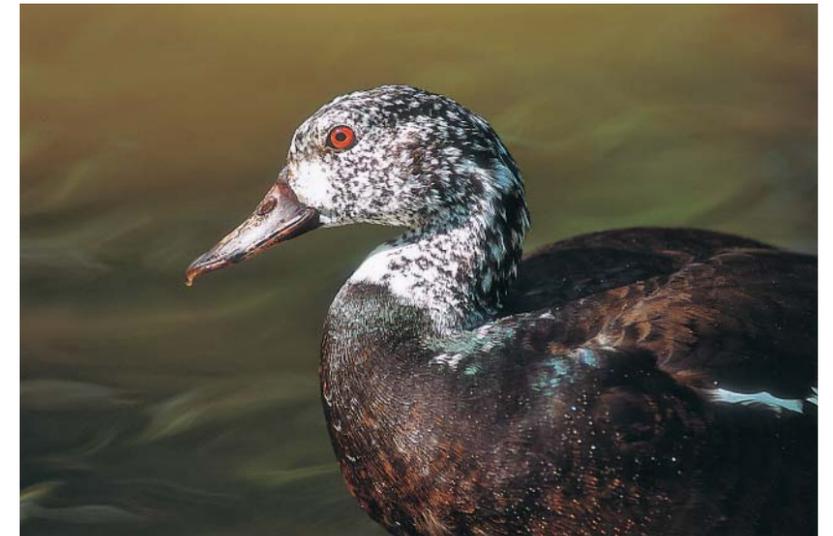
Ages 13 to 61:\$7

Ages 3 to 12 :\$5

Children 2 and under:Free

Group discounts are available

As a nonprofit organization, Sylvan Heights relies upon member support and donations. For information on joining the Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Society or making a donation, visit www.shwpark.com.



White-winged Wood Duck
Cairina scutulata



White-headed Duck
Oxyura leucocephala

The Lubbocks' wholehearted devotion to waterfowl conservation is clearly evident in their home life as well. Every year, they host and mentor interns who travel to Scotland Neck to study avian husbandry. Limited to three interns at a time, the exclusive program offers students intensive hands-on training in captive breeding and waterfowl management. At night, the interns gather around the Lubbock dinner table to continue their training. "A lot of teaching happens at night," says Ali. "We've hosted about 360 people in the last 18 years, mostly young folks, and now we're starting to host some of our former interns' children."

The couple's infectious enthusiasm for their work permeates the atmosphere of the center and is shared by the rest of the Sylvan Heights staff. "I think we're introducing people to something they don't normally see," says Mike. "There really is no other place like this in North Carolina. We certainly learn something new every day doing this work." ❖

Ida Lynch is co-owner of Niche Publishing and an occasional contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina.

Northern Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
Dendrocygna a. autumnalis

