



Photo: merckh.ca

CATCHING UP WITH THE BIRD COUNTER OF SWAN HAVEN

For Jaikka Jantunen, birding is a hobby, passion, obsession, and occupation

If you've been to Swan Haven on Marsh Lake in April, when trumpeter swans feed and rest by the hundreds en route to their nesting areas further north, you've likely seen Jaikka Jantunen peering at the water from behind a telescope. He's been there counting birds and working as an interpreter every spring for 21 years.

Name? Jaikka Jantunen.

Place of Residence? Whitehorse, for at least eight months of the year.

Occupation? I'm a contract bird biologist. I cover a fair bit of the Yukon road network, from Watson Lake to the Top of the World Highway and up to Inuvik, N.W.T., doing contracts for the Yukon government, Environment Canada, and the Yukon Bird Observatories.

What kind of work is it? It's all counting birds in one way or another. Most of them are related to multi-year population-monitoring programs. For the North American Breeding Bird Survey,

How accurate is it? The number may be off. But if you're within 10% of the actual number, that's acceptable from a scientific perspective.

Birding must require a lot of patience? Yes. And ridiculously early mornings, especially in the summer. I have my personal rule that I don't set my alarm to go off before 2 a.m., but it often goes off at that time. When I'm doing hawk and eagle migration counts, I work from dawn to dusk.

What do you like about birds? I like the challenge of identifying them, I like being outside, and I like the birds themselves.

How long have you lived in the Yukon? Since 1999.

What brought you here? My ex got a job here. We moved up from the Vancouver area.

What keeps you here? My work and I like the Yukon.

"FOR ME, THE NORTH IS NOT 'NORTH OF ORDINARY.' FOR ME, NORTH IS NORMAL."

Settle the debate for us: what makes someone a "real" Yukoner? Because I don't usually spend my winter here!

Where do you usually go? I visit friends and family in Finland, where I'm from, and I try to spend half the winter in places that are warm and have a lot of birds.

Birding is clearly more than just a job for you? Yes. It's my hobby, obsession, passion, and occupation.

What's the best meal you've ever had in the territory? My landlords cook the best meals. I don't think there's a restaurant meal that surpasses their creations.

What do you wish more Canadians knew about life here? Life in Whitehorse is relatively urban. It's not the "Jack London" life people seem to picture. We have everything most people need, and we have airlines that help us get in and out. What other city of 33,000 has multiple daily flights to destinations over 2,000 km away?

Where is your favourite place in the territory? There are two that I really enjoy in springtime. One is the Tagish bridge, a great place for birding. And then there's a little spot near Johnson's

Crossing. It's a shoreline bluff I often get to before sunrise, and I sit there and sip my morning coffee. Sometimes lynx or bears walk below my feet.

What's the best up-close-and-personal encounter you've had with local wildlife? Last year I was near Minio doing a nighthawk survey when I noticed something dark on the road to my left. It was a black timber wolf trotting towards me on the centre line of the road. When it got closer to me, it stopped and tilted its head, looking at me. Then it very casually moved to the edge of the road and walked within 10 metres of me, watching me as I watched it. It was almost as if there was a connection between us. I was thinking afterwards that at no point was I the least bit afraid, but I was laughing at the fact that had it been a bear I would have been in my car so quickly.

You're on the phone to a friend from the Outside. No one from the government is listening. Do you say "Yukon" or "The Yukon"? In English, "The Yukon." In Finnish, we just call it "Yukon."

When the cold and dark get to you, where do you go to recharge? During a normal [non-pandemic] year, I generally leave the Yukon in November and return in February or March. But the

Yukon's cold and dark are not such an issue. The "birdlessness" is. There is very little for me to do here in the winter because there are very few birds.

Dog mushing or snowmobiling? I'm completely indifferent to both.

You've just won a huge jackpot at Diamond Tooth Gerties Casino, and you have 24 hours to spend it in the Yukon. Where are you headed? I would charter an aircraft to Herschel Island and the Clarence Lagoon, which is the furthest west you can go on the north shore of the Yukon. I've been to Herschel Island before, but Clarence Lagoon is out of reach for anyone with normal-sized pockets. If you had the money to go there, you'd probably spend a month in Brazil instead.

Finally, what does "The Spell of the Yukon" mean to you personally? I can understand the spell for some people, but for me, the North is not "North of Ordinary." For me, North is normal. I grew up in the North, even though it's nine time zones away.

This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity. Y

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