



Trumpeter swans in V formation. Photo by Sue, Back Yard Biology,
<https://bybio.wordpress.com/tag/crex-meadows/>

The other day I was out walking the dog down a wind-swept lane, when I heard something that reminded me that the end of the year is near. It was a resonant horn-like sound up high that moved from one horizon to the other. Large white bodies, long necks, flying in a V formation... it was a flock of trumpeter swans headed southward. We call them "the caboose" because they mark the end of the fall migration. The big move started back in September with the hummingbirds, warblers, blue-winged teal, and other early migrants, but was held up this fall due to unseasonably warm weather. Finally the cold fronts blew through the Northern Prairie in early December, freezing up the sheetwater, ponds, and smaller lakes, which forced most of the remaining mallards, geese, and other late migrants southward. Swans, however, love the rivers and large lakes that stay open longer than most, so typically they are the last of the last to journey southward. But they don't have to go very far south. All they need are open water and food to overwinter, so many stop along the Mississippi River in southern Wisconsin. As the end of the year draws near, many *Homo sapiens* follow the long-distance migrators to the warm and sunny shores of the Gulf Coast and South Padre Island. But others, such as trumpeter swans and stout-hearted little chickadees, brave the cold and snow, finding it just fine to tough it out through the Wisconsin winter. I will stay with them here as well, and look forward to greeting another frosty New Year.

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