

Swan Upping



Incubation by the female does not begin until the clutch is complete and so the young hatch together. When they are very small, the cygnets often ride on their mother's back.



THE HISTORY OF SWAN UPPING



Historically, the reigning King or Queen was entitled to claim ownership of any unmarked mute swans swimming in open water or to give such rights to others. It is not known when this custom began but the first written record of the swan as a royal bird dates back to around 1186 and relates to a number of birds in a captive state, suggesting that the custom of owning swans may have already been in existence for many years.

It was desirable to own swans because the young birds, (cygnets), were valued highly for food and often served at banquets and feasts. Each year the birds were rounded up during Swan Upping under the control of the Crown; this usually took place in late July when the parent birds were in moult and the cygnets were too small to fly.

The cygnets were identified with the mark of the owner of the parent birds; if the parents belonged to different owners the brood was shared between them. When there was an odd number of cygnets, the owner of the male bird was given the extra cygnet. Some of the cygnets were released to maintain the breeding stock and the remainder were taken away to be fattened up for eating. Anyone caught stealing birds was severely punished.

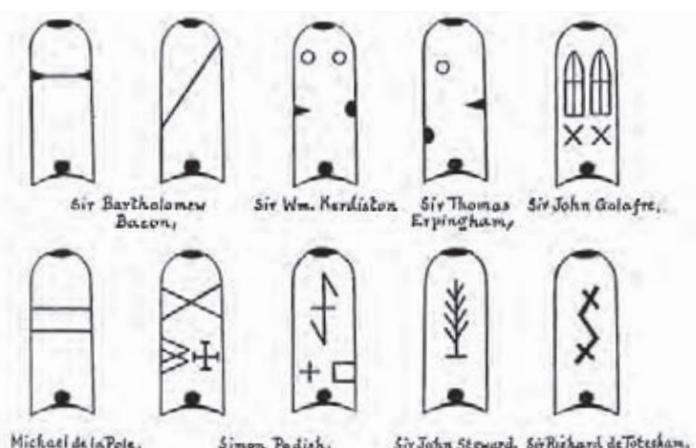
Catching the broods at Swan Upping was very labour-intensive, involving many men and boats. As domestic poultry became more common, swans became less valuable. Therefore the importance of Swan Upping began to diminish and by the 1850s few people retained their rights to own swans.



The flags of the Vintners' and Dyers'. The Crown gave the two Livery Companies the right to own swans on the River Thames in the late fifteenth century.



The Crown boats fly The Monarch's cipher.



Swan-marks that were in use before 1400. As many people had the right to own swans in the same area, each owner used a distinctive mark which was cut into the surface of the beak with a sharp knife. The earliest known beak mark dates back to 1230.



The cygnets are taken ashore where they are checked for any injuries, weighed and measured, as a guide to their health. Any sick or injured birds are taken to a swan rescue organisation for treatment and the rest are ringed according to ownership and returned to the river.

SWAN UPPING TODAY



The families are encircled by the Swan Uppers who then gradually bring their boats closer together until they can safely lift the swans out of the water.

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ODAY, APART FROM THE CROWN, ONLY THREE BODIES HAVE MAINTAINED THEIR RIGHTS TO OWN SWANS. THESE ARE THE ILCHESTER FAMILY WHICH OWNS THE SWANS BREEDING IN THE COLONY AT ABBOTSURY, DORSET AND THE TWO LIVERY COMPANIES, THE VINTNERS AND DYERS. THESE TWO COMPANIES, TOGETHER WITH THE CROWN, MAINTAIN THE TRADITION OF SWAN UPPING ON THE RIVER THAMES – ALTHOUGH, TODAY THE EMPHASIS IS ON CONSERVATION – THE BIRDS ARE NO LONGER EATEN!

SWAN UPPING OCCURS IN THE THIRD WEEK OF JULY. THE SWAN UPPERS, DRESSED IN UNIFORM, TRAVEL IN SIX TRADITIONAL WOODEN SKIFFS, TWO EACH FOR THE CROWN, THE VINTNERS AND THE DYERS. FORMERLY SWAN UPPING TOOK PLACE BETWEEN LONDON AND HENLEY, BUT NOWADAYS THE JOURNEY BEGINS AT SUNBURY AND ENDS AT ABINGDON. THE UPERS TAKE FIVE DAYS TO COVER THE 79 MILES.

ON LOCATING A FAMILY OF SWANS, THE UPERS GIVE THE CRY “ALL-UP” AND THE BOATS CONVERGE ON THE BROOD, SURROUND THEM WITH THE BOATS AND TAKE THEM ASHORE FOR EXAMINATION AND MARKING. ORIGINALLY, THE TWO COMPANIES MADE THEIR OWN MARKS ON THE BIRDS’ BEAKS, ONE NICK FOR A DYERS’ BIRD AND TWO FOR A VINTNERS’; TODAY THE TWO COMPANIES USE THEIR OWN RINGS. THE SWANS BELONGING TO THE CROWN ARE LEFT UNMARKED.



Once the cygnets have been checked and marked, the brood is returned to the river.



Entanglement with fishing tackle
is the most common injury
suffered by mute swans.



The identification numbers of the adult birds are recorded and rings are placed on the cygnets' legs. This enables the welfare of the swans to be monitored in the future.



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NCE CAUGHT, THE BROODS ARE TAKEN ASHORE, WHERE THEY ARE EXAMINED BY THE QUEEN'S SWAN WARDEN FOR DISEASE OR INJURY. THE MOST COMMON INJURY IS CAUSED BY FISHING TACKLE; SWANS OFTEN SWALLOW BREAD CONTAINING HOOKS OR SWIM THROUGH FISHING LINES AND BECOME ENTANGLED. SOME OF THESE INJURIES CAN BE DEALT WITH ON THE RIVERBANK, BUT OTHERS, SUCH AS A HOOK DOWN THE THROAT, REQUIRE AN EXPENSIVE OPERATION AND A LONG PERIOD OF RECUPERATION, AND THE BIRDS HAVE TO BE TAKEN TO A RESCUE ORGANISATION FOR TREATMENT. THESE ORGANISATIONS ARE SUPPORTED BY THE VINTNERS' AND DYERS' LIVERY COMPANIES.

THE QUEEN'S SWAN MARKER ESTABLISHES THE OWNERSHIP OF THE PARENT BIRDS AND DETERMINES HOW OWNERSHIP OF THE BROOD SHOULD BE ALLOCATED. THE SWAN MARKERS OF THE TWO LIVERY COMPANIES THEN PLACE THEIR RINGS ON THE CYGNETS' LEGS. THE BIRDS RETAINED BY THE CROWN ARE LEFT UNMARKED. THE SWAN UPPERS THEN RETURN THE BROOD TO THE RIVER, TAKING CARE THAT THE CYGNETS DO NOT BECOME SEPARATED FROM THEIR PARENTS.



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ODAY, THE MAIN AIM OF SWAN UPPING IS THE WELFARE AND CONSERVATION OF SWANS ON THE RIVER THAMES. IT IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE PEOPLE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALTHY RIVER.

THE SWAN UPPING CENSUS PROVIDED A UNIQUE RECORD OF THE NUMBERS OF SWANS PRESENT ON THE RIVER THAMES BETWEEN LONDON AND HENLEY IN THE PAST. NUMBERS WERE LOW AT THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST CENTURY AND ROSE STEADILY UNTIL ABOUT 1940. THE NUMBER FELL DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THEN ROSE STEADILY AGAIN, REACHING MORE THAN 1300 BIRDS BY THE MID-1960S. THEREAFTER THE NUMBER STARTED TO FALL DRAMATICALLY FROM A MAXIMUM OF 76 PAIRS WITH CYGNETS ON THE LONDON TO HENLEY STRETCH, TO ONLY 7 IN 1985. RESEARCH SHOWED THAT LEAD POISONING, LARGEMLY FROM SWALLOWING LEAD FISHING WEIGHTS, WAS A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE DECLINE. MOST LEAD WEIGHTS WERE BANNED IN THE LATE 1980S, AFTER WHICH THE SWAN POPULATION STEADILY INCREASED AGAIN

V A T I O N



Swans are strictly vegetarian; a female has reached down and pulled water plants to the surface for her cygnets to feed on.

An average pair lays six eggs of which four will hatch and two will survive to fly. This usually occurs in September. The birds then spend their 'teenage' years in the flocks before pairing up and looking for a place to breed.



WITH 28 PAIRS WITH CYGNETS ON THIS STRETCH IN 2006 AND 47 PAIRS OVER THE WHOLE ROUTE TO ABINGDON. IN ADDITION TO THE LEAD BAN, EFFICIENT RESCUE ORGANISATIONS AND A SERIES OF MILD WINTERS HAVE ALSO HELPED THE SWAN POPULATION TO INCREASE. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, STILL MANY FEWER BREEDING PAIRS THAN THERE WERE IN THE EARLY POST-WAR YEARS.

LIFE FOR SWANS ON THE THAMES IS NOT EASY. IN MANY AREAS AQUATIC VEGETATION IS SCARCE AND IT IS OFTEN DIFFICULT FOR SWANS TO FEED ON THE RIVERBANK. A PEACEFUL RIVERBANK WHERE SWANS CAN WALK IN AND OUT OF THE WATER AND FEED ON GRASS PROVIDES AN IDEAL NESTING SITE. HOWEVER, WITH THE INCREASE IN CONSTRUCTION OF SHEER CONCRETE OR STEEL BANKS AND THE NUMBER OF MOORED BOATS, MANY PARTS OF THE RIVER ARE BECOMING DIFFICULT PLACES FOR SWANS TO LIVE. FURTHER HAZARDS FACED BY SWANS INCLUDE FISHING TACKLE INJURIES, FLYING INTO OVERHEAD WIRES, SHOOTINGS, VANDALISM AND DOG ATTACKS.

EDUCATION

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HE RIVER AND ITS WILDLIFE PROVIDE A VALUABLE AMENITY FOR THE BRITISH PUBLIC AND IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT THAT NEW GENERATIONS LEARN HOW TO APPRECIATE IT AND RESPECT IT.

SWAN UPPERS REGARD THE OPPORTUNITY TO TELL SCHOOLCHILDREN ABOUT SWANS AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF SWAN UPPING. THE UPPERS MEET WITH PARTIES OF SCHOOLCHILDREN ALONG THE RIVER, INTRODUCE THEM TO SWANS AND DISCUSS THE HISTORY OF SWAN UPPING. THEY ALSO EXPLAIN THE SWANS' BIOLOGY AND HOW SWAN UPPING CONTRIBUTES TO THE CONSERVATION OF THE SWAN POPULATION TODAY. THE CHILDREN ARE ENCOURAGED TO THINK HOW THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE WELLBEING OF THE RIVER. YOUNG ANGLERS IN PARTICULAR ARE WARNED ABOUT THE DANGERS OF FISHING AND ARE TAUGHT TO BE CAREFUL TO AVOID INJURING WILDLIFE.

IT IS OFTEN POSSIBLE FOR THE CHILDREN TO WITNESS A CATCH AND THEN TO BE SHOWN THE SWANS AND CYGNETS AT CLOSE QUARTERS, WHICH IS A NEW EXPERIENCE FOR MOST OF THEM. AT THIS STAGE, THE CYGNETS ARE STILL LARGELY COVERED WITH DOWN AS THEY HAVE NOT YET GROWN THEIR FIRST FEATHERS.



An important part of the meetings with school children is the "Questions and Answers" session run by The Queen's Swan Marker.



*Children study
a young cygnet
at close quarters.*



FACTS ABOUT SWANS:

- THE FULL NAME IS MUTE SWAN; THE SCIENTIFIC NAME IS *CYGNUS OLOR*.
- WHOOPER AND BEWICK'S SWANS ALSO OCCUR IN THE UK, BUT USUALLY ONLY IN WINTER. THEY HAVE BLACK AND YELLOW BILLS, NOT RED ONES.
- THE MALE SWAN IS CALLED A COB, HIS MATE A PEN AND THE YOUNG BIRDS ARE CYGNETS.
- A LARGE COB MAY WEIGH UP TO 15KG AND HAVE A WING-SPAN OF UP TO 2.3M; THE PEN IS SMALLER.
- THE AVERAGE CLUTCH SIZE IS SIX EGGS; EACH EGG WEIGHS ABOUT 350G.
- INCUBATION TAKES ABOUT 35 DAYS.
- THE CYGNETS BEGIN TO FLY WHEN 4 TO 5 MONTHS OLD; THIS USUALLY TAKES PLACE IN SEPTEMBER.
- THE YOUNG BIRDS SPEND THEIR "TEENAGE" YEARS IN THE FLOCKS.
- SWANS BEGIN TO BREED WHEN 3 OR 4 YEARS OLD
- IN EXCEPTIONAL CASES, BREEDING BIRDS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO LIVE FOR 20 YEARS; HOWEVER THE AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS 10 TO 12 YEARS.

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THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF DYERS