

# SERENITY - THE SWAN

Carol Mitchell (Member 685)

We have all been there!! Whether it was in your public, private or personal life, whether it was your fault or not, there is that O!M!!G!!! moment when the rictus of the smile becomes fixed around the mouth and the brain is going 'OOPS!! How do I get out of this one?' So the surface remains serene but the feet are paddling like mad. How swan-like can you be?

The Swan is probably so recognisable as there are such a limited number of varieties. Just a few beauties - the Mute, the Black and Black-necked, the 'noisy' ones the Whooper and the Trumpeter, the ice-maiden Tundra Swan (also known as the Whistling Swan) and the less common Coscoroba - and, at first glance, they are relatively similar in size and shape, albeit not in colour. But nothing in this world is ever simple, since we Brits use eight names for what scientists still regard as seven species. The New World Whistling Swan is *Cygnus columbianus columbianus* and its Eurasian counterpart is the Bewick's *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*.

Two species are recognised as National Birds. In 1984 the Mute Swan became the one voted by TV viewers in Denmark (Denmark 1986 S.G.829) whilst the Whooper was announced in 1981 as the Finland favourite.

The Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) is the most prolific of the family in our islands (G.B.1993, S.G.1639: Afghanistan 1989, S.G.1276: Belarus 1994, S.G.70) and it remains under the protection of the Crown with a licence required to breed or deal with them in any way.



In fact, during the reign of Henry VII if you stole a swan's egg it was prison, varlet, for a year and a day!! It was also at this time that the position of Swan Master was instituted at court. This was a very profitable post, big business in those days, with fixed charges being levied. It was six shillings and eight pence for an owner to register his mark on the official swan roll and it was payable every time it changed hands. In addition, there was an annual licensing charge of four pence to keep any mark on the roll and a fee of one penny for each adult and two pence for each cygnet caught during 'swan upping'.



Mute is an odd name to choose, for silent it is not. It has a range of quiet honks and snorts and makes a very loud hissing when threatened (the Russian name for the Mute Swan actually means 'hissing') (Gambia 2000, S.G. 3656). It is when

compared to other species that the Mute is more muted as its trachea is shorter than its cousins. It is certainly not a contender for the idea that a swan sings before it dies giving us the notion of the 'Swan Song'!

In myths, legends and literature all over the world one recurrent theme emerges of swans turning into people and *vice versa*. In 'The Arabian Nights' Hassan of Bassorah visits a place inhabited by bird-maidens. When they remove their feathers, they are transformed into beautiful young women. Hassan steals the feather garment of one of the maidens in order to keep her in human form as his wife. However, when he falls asleep, she retrieves her feathers and succeeds in flying away.

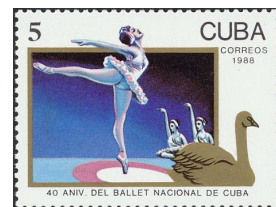
A Russian tale begins with Mikhail the Rover about to shoot a swan which warns him 'Shoot not, else ill-fortune will doom thee for evermore'. On landing, the swan turns into a beautiful maiden but, as Mikhail tries to embrace her, she warns him that she is an infidel. However, if he takes her to the holy city of Kiev, she can be received into the church and thus be free to marry him. So at least one happy ending!

Not so in the South German version where a swan speaks to a forester about to kill her. This maiden tells him that, if he keeps her existence a secret for a whole year, she will be his. Guess what - he couldn't keep his mouth shut and so loses her.



This theme translates magically into the world of music with Richard Wagner's 1848 opera Lohengrin' (Austria 1986 S.G. 2094) and one of the most favourite ballets, Pyotr Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' of 1877 (Cuba 1988,

S.G.3392). The 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the 1886 work of Camille Saint-Saens in 'The Carnival of Animals' where the 13<sup>th</sup> and penultimate movement 'The Swan' is one of the classic orchestral cello solos and there is also the 1895



evocative Finnish tone poem by Jean Sibelius as 'The Swan of Tuonela' (Finland 1956 S.G. 563). One of the earliest pieces of the century was Franz Schubert's 'Le chant de cygne' composed in October 1828 just a month before he died. So perhaps he believed in the 'Swan Song' idea (Mali 1978 S.G. 620).



Probably the oldest myth comes from India where the nymph, Urvasi, was expelled from heaven by Lord Brahma and on earth fell in love with a mortal man. But the condition on which this was allowed was broken with the inevitable consequences. However, in its original state, this tale has a choice of endings: happy or sad, you choose. Similar stories can be found in Babylonian and Egyptian lore, in the myths of Greece and Rome (which offers the story of Leda, wife of the King of Sparta, famously seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan) and as far afield as the Inuit people of Greenland and the Samoyedes of Eastern Siberia.



Ireland offers a particularly rich tradition of swan stories to the point where Ireland was described by a seventeenth century poet as 'the swan abounding land'. A different take on the swan-maiden/human tale is one of the best known Irish legends of the 'Children of Llyr'. King Llyr, the Sea God, had four children – Finnguala, Aed, Fiachra and Conn – who were cruelly bewitched by their wicked step-mother, Aife, and turned into swans. They were doomed to spend three hundred years in each of three separate places, an exile of 900 years. However, they retained the ability to speak and consoled themselves with poetry and songs which people from all over Ireland flocked to hear. It would be only when a Prince of the North married a Princess of the South after the 900 years would the spell be broken. But the children were too old to be returned to human form and so became pillars of dust. If ever they became separated, it was rumoured that the swan children would meet on the north side of the Island of Rathlin off County Antrim. There is still a bay there, Attitudy Bay, which translates as the Bay of Swans. And, because the swans were reputed to sing so beautifully, it became a criminal act to kill a swan - a statute still in force today.

It is not a surprise that the Danes voted the Mute Swan as their avian icon given that it is the subject of one of the best-known and most-loved of more than 160 stories by Hans Christian Anderson. First published in 1843, 'The Ugly Duckling' became core to his literary legacy and, in turn, it has generated a proliferation of films, songs and multi-media versions (Hungary 1987 S.G.3819). It is not a surprise either that it appeals to children and adults alike with its happy ending.



The Mute Swan is categorised as being of Least Concern on the IUCN list as it was estimated in 2015 that the global population was around 610,000 individuals and that, overall, numbers were increasing. In Denmark in 2000 there were 4500 to 5000 breeding pairs which is a far cry from the three or four pairs left in the 1920s as a result of hunting. Denmark is also home to Western Europe's largest breeding colony in Ringkøbing Fjord, a shallow lagoon on the west coast of Jutland. The largest colony in the world is reputed to be in the Volga Delta with 11,000 breeding pairs.

In England, it is Abbotsbury in Dorset which is justifiably famous for its population but it is very different from anywhere else in Britain. The swans live in a carefully managed and very healthy environment with large supplies of eel grass. All the swans there breed in a dense colony and the place is unique in that the first (originally, seven) pairs to hatch are placed in rearing pens with their brood. Other cygnets are added (not the parents!) until a 'family' consists of a pair and up to 20 young. These are fed artificially until September when, nearly ready to fly, they are released.

Hence, due to this system, the cygnet survival rate is artificially high among the managed birds which, obviously, helps to counteract the losses in those broods which are left to their own devices.



In unmanaged populations, the clutch of eggs is normally 5 – 7 eggs (G.B. 1993 S.G.1642) which are laid, normally in April, in a huge mound of a very untidy nest typically on stream and river banks and, preferably, among reeds. However, anywhere there is a decent size body of water will do as long as it has easy access to and from the water as they need to be able to walk rather than fly to and from the nest. The average egg weighs around 350g and measures 12 x 7 cm with a shell approximately 1 mm thick. Only when the clutch is complete does the hen start the incubation process. Unlike the cob, she has a brood patch – the bare patch of skin on her chest which contains many blood vessels – to keep the eggs warm. Incubation normally lasts 35 days whilst the female rarely eats and can lose two-thirds of her normal weight which is normally around 9.5kg. The cob is heavier with an average weight of 12kg and, exceptionally, up to 16kg.

The young emerge from the eggs some 48 hours after they make the first cracks in the shell. Usually, all the eggs hatch within about 24 hours of each other and the cygnets remain in the nest for 24-48 hours before taking to the water (G.B. #1640). Even their first downy plumage is remarkably waterproof and they maintain this – as they will for the rest of their lives – by constant preening and by rubbing the preen oil onto their feathers.



Young swans hatch with a good supply of food in their yolk sacs on which they can live for several days. In that time they have to learn to feed themselves as their parents do not actually put food into their mouths as do many other species. But the cygnets are not independent of their parents as the adults perform vital functions for their offspring. Firstly, they protect them from potential predators; secondly, they will brood their young in cold or wet conditions and thirdly, and most importantly, they make food readily available by stirring up food from below the water so that the new-born cygnets can peck at small items on the surface for ease of feeding. But, by the time a cygnet is a week old it can already submerge its head for two seconds and this ability increases to about six seconds by the time it is a month old. However, the technique of 'up ending' to graze on the river bottom does take a lot of practice and takes the youngsters some time to master!

The long swan neck also enables the bird to reach upwards for a favourite food, the Crack Willow, rather like a grazing giraffe with the swan's neck consisting of 25 bones – 18 more than in a giraffe's neck!



# THE SWAN (3)

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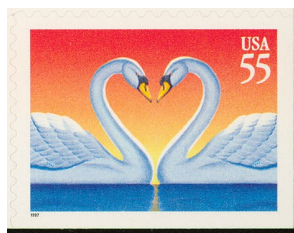
Whilst the cygnets are maturing throughout the summer, the adults undergo their annual moult during July and August (G.B. 1993 S.G.1641: Mongolia 1973 S.G. 770).



The young start to fly in September as the families break up both through the cygnets need to find their own territory and the parents aggressive behaviour to retain their patch to be ready for the next breeding season. Immature swans congregate in flocks from the moment they leave their parents and these juveniles (G.B. 1993 S.G. 1643) start to

engage in courtship conduct in preparation for later life.

Once a mate has been chosen, the pair flies off to find a suitable breeding territory as, without an exclusive patch of their own, Mute Swans will not breed.



(China P.R. 1983 S.G.3284: Macedonia 1994 S.G. 65: USA 1997 S.G. 3274/5). That chosen territory is then patrolled regularly and defended most robustly against all attempted interlopers.

One of the most common questions asked of researchers is 'Do swans mate for life?' Well, the answer is that, like human beings, some do and some don't!! Apparently, the majority of pairs remain together as long as their partner is still alive and a detailed study on the Thames population found one pair which bred together for 19 consecutive seasons.

But this same study also recorded that some old male swans had as many as four mates during their lives which rather dispels the romantic myth that a bereaved swan will never take another mate!

Hazards faced are legion and the majority are man-made. The natural ones are wild predators, foxes in particular, and long, cold, wet winters. Those generated by humans are more severe. Vandals (Germany F.R. 1972 S.G. 1616), pollution, , dogs, overhead cables and pylons all kill with lead poisoning and fishing tackle injuries amongst the most obvious and distressing.

Longevity is variable. There are documented differences between protected and unprotected flocks. The average life expectancy of a 'wild' swan is around 13-15 years whereas in managed populations this can double. The record is still held by a Danish swan when, in 2009, the deceased ringed Mute was found to be over 40 years old. He obviously had a long life - let's hope it was a happy one.

Carol Mitchell

Kyrgyzstan World Wildlife Fund souvenir sheet below, issued in 2015

