

Swans

by Bob Elgas
Big Timber, Montana

Distributed worldwide are eight species of swans, most of which are found in the northern hemisphere. Only two, the Black Swan of Australia and the Black-necked Swan of South America, are native to the southern hemisphere. Exclusive of Antarctica, Africa is the only continent to which swans are not native.

The species with which most people are familiar is the Mute Swan of Europe. It is especially well known in Britain where it has been maintained in parks and estates for hundreds of years. It is now considered a semi-domesticated species. It is this species that is widely known from early literature, fairy tales and mythology. It is interesting that they should have been named Mute Swans for, while they do not have powerful voices, they are far from mute. Their call is comparatively soft — a rather melodious, mewing call. Other northern swans have powerful trumpeting calls so that by contrast the Mute is much less vocal. Perhaps this might explain the name.

All swans are ornamental, being especially graceful upon water. This is particularly true of the Mute. It carries its wings in a raised, arched position above the back, with the neck gracefully curved — a handsome sight indeed. They are at their best upon water, where much of their time is spent. Of all swans, the Mute's legs are positioned further back on the body. As a result, they are less adept upon land where they walk with a somewhat labored and rolling gait. Mutes are one of the largest of the clan, being equaled or surpassed only by the Trumpeter of North America, which, indeed, is the largest of the world's waterfowl.

In addition to their long history in Europe, Mutes have been maintained in American collections for many years. They breed very well and escaped birds have established themselves in the wild. They have become relatively abundant in eastern areas of

the United States where they pose some significant problems. In addition to being dominant over native American species, their feeding habits are destructive to the ecosystems of shallow marshland areas.

The Black-necked Swan of South America and the Black Swan of Australia are the two representatives of the southern hemisphere. Both are highly ornamental, adjust well to captivity, and are dependable breeders.

As the name applies, the Australian swan is entirely black. However, there is a strong silvery cast to the plumage and the back feathers are curly. The curled feathers are unique to the species and give it a particularly pleasing appearance. The eyes and bill are red, which is also unique, as other swans have black eyes and black is the predominant bill color. In all swans, the upper mandible extends all the way through the lores area to the eye. The Australian swan has an unusually long neck, which it arches gracefully. It also has the capability to fluff the neck feathers in a particularly pleasing manner. The voice is somewhat similar to the Mute's — a soft whistling, mewing call.

As one might imagine, the Black-necked Swan's head and full length of the neck are black. The body is white and the bill has red and blue coloration. There is a sizable knob on the upper mandible. It is the smallest of the swans, is very attractive, and comparatively scarce in avicultural collections.

South America is the home of an additional bird, the Coscoroba, which has been included in the swan family. It has been included with the swans largely on the basis of its being a large all white bird (the wing tips are black). Actually the Coscoroba is much more closely aligned with the whistling ducks than the swans. The bill is much different from that of the swans. The eye is pale and the legs are long and well forward, features typical of whis-

ling ducks. Especially significant is the strongly mottled pattern of the downy young which, again, is similar to downy whistling ducks. Downy young of true swans are all silvery gray with no pattern. The Coscoroba is a form unique unto itself but should not be included with the true swans.

In addition to the Mute Swan, there are five species native to the northern hemisphere. These are the Trumpeter and Whistling Swans of North America, and the Whooper, Bewick and Jankowski swans of Eurasia. Collectively, these five are known as the northern swans, and all are similar in appearance and habits. All are pure white with black feet and bills. Again — the upper mandible extends through the lores area to the eye, and, exclusive of the Trumpeter, in which the lores area is black, a bright yellow lores patch is characteristic.

The extent of the yellow patch varies according to species. It is smallest in the Whistler or Tundra Swan and largest is the Whooper. In the latter form, the yellow extends all the way from the eyelids to well forward of the nostrils so that only about the forward third of the mandible is black.

The Bewick (which incidentally is pronounced "buick") and the Jankowski have a comparatively smaller area of yellow than has the Whooper, but decidedly greater than that of the Tundra Swan. The differences between the Bewick and Jankowski are so slight that taxonomists now believe they may be a cline of a single species. The name Bewick should prevail.

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"Three Days Old" is the title of this painting of a Whistler Swan family done by Bob Elgas of Montana.

There is also confusion regarding the Whistling/Tundra Swan. Since its earliest description, well over a hundred years ago, it has been known as the Whistling Swan. The reason for the name is obscure inasmuch as the voice is a strong trumpeting call. There is nothing to suggest a whistling call. Recently the name has been changed to Tundra Swan, which is more appropriate. During the summer breeding season, they are found exclusively on the open northland tundras. Old habits die slowly, so many still refer to them by the original

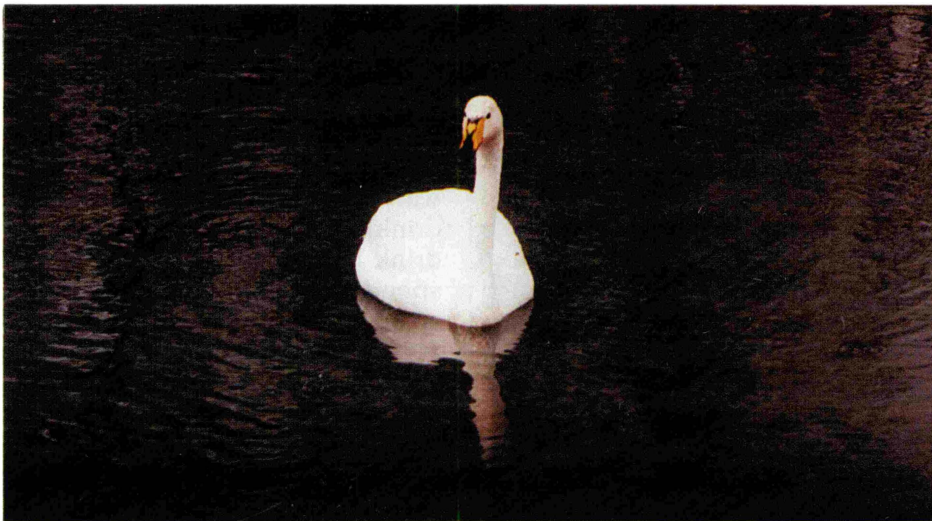


This photo shows wild geese, swans and cranes foraging for grain put out by humans during harsh winters.

Photo by Bob Elgas



The Trumpeter Swan is the largest of the world's waterfowl. This photo shows their greeting display.



The Whooper Swan is one of the northern hemisphere swans. Although it does not have the tremendous voice of the Trumpeter Swan, it still has a loud vocalization.

name. Be that as it may, Whistling and Tundra Swans are one and the same.

All northern swans are similar in appearance. Their legs are positioned forward on the body, so they walk with ease. Water, of course, is the natural element for swans, and nothing is more pleasing than the sight of these birds gliding gracefully across a peaceful waterway. Perhaps the most noticeable difference in the northern swans is in their size and volume of voice. The Trumpeter, which is the world's largest waterfowl, can weight over 30 pounds. The Whooper is somewhat smaller, while the Bewick and Tundra Swans, at approximately half the Trumpeter's size, are the

smallest. As the name implies, the Trumpeter has a tremendous voice, sounding much like a fortissimo blast on a trombone. The Whooper, Tundra and Bewick are progressively higher in pitch, and somewhat lesser in volume. All have greeting and display calls that are quite pleasing.

Swans, and especially the northern varieties, have a natural affinity for humans. Handreared swans have a tendency to bond closely with their keepers and can become delightful pets. It is quite a unique experience to have swans follow one about seeking companionship.

Swans are easily maintained in captivity, to which they adjust with ease. Cold weather has virtually no affect on them. They are most comfortable when swimming water is available, so at least a minimum should be provided. Indeed, if swans are to be bred, swimming water is a necessity. They copulate in the water and without water eggs will be infertile. The expanse of water need not be large, but sufficient to accommodate the birds with at least some room to spare. There is nothing quite so attractive as the sight of a pair of swans skimming the surface of a quiet pond or brook. It turns an otherwise ordinary waterway into a magic pool of enchantment.

Swans feed extensively on vegetation, especially submergents which grow naturally in marshes and ponds. They also graze extensively on tender



The Whistling Swan has recently had a name change to the Tundra Swan. Its trumpeting call does not suggest a whistling vocalization. The female is incubating eggs on a large nest.

Photos by Bob Elgas

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green grass. They need supplemental foods such as whole grains like wheat and corn. Commercial chicken and turkey preparations are excellent, but it is important to feed only those that are non-medicated. Swans tend to be slow feeders, frequently eating small amounts at a time, returning later for more. When maintained in association with other waterfowl, most of which feed more rapidly, it is wise to be certain the swans get an appropriate amount. As a safeguard to ensure an adequate food supply, an elevated feeding station can be constructed sufficiently high so that swans, with their long necks, can reach it while smaller birds cannot.

Swans breed well in captivity, usually building their nests near water. Nests are usually bulky affairs constructed from whatever material is available. Dried vegetation is the usual material and both birds participate in nest construction. The normal method is for the male, known as a cob, to drag outlying material toward the nest site, while the female, known as a penn, does the actual arranging of material. A typical nest can be as much as three or four feet in diameter. The center is cupped out and lined with finer material.

A normal clutch is five eggs, but the number can vary either way. Once production is initiated, the female usually lays on alternate days. As eggs are produced, they are covered with nest material until the clutch is complete. The eggs are large and off-white in color. When the clutch is complete, the female lines the nest with down from her breast, and incubation begins.

The incubation period varies from 30 days in smaller species to as much as 36 in the larger forms. Incubation is done by the female alone, but the male stands close by, guarding the nest. The female usually leaves the nest once a day to feed, drink and bathe. At such times she covers the nest with a blanket of down which keeps the eggs warm until her return.

Swan hatchlings, known as cygnets, are precocious. As soon as the natal down is dry, they are ready to leave the nest and follow their parents. Perhaps it might be worthwhile to reflect upon the old fairy tale of the ugly duckling — a poor little hatchling so grotesque and ugly that it was abandoned and shunned by all. Ultimately,

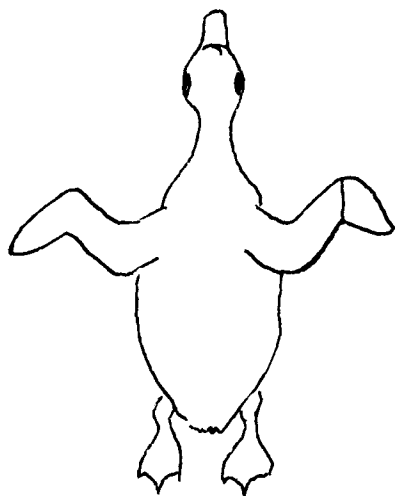
the sad unattractive baby matured into a lovely graceful swan and was at last accepted for the beautiful being it was. Perhaps it was a good fairy tale, but it was far from factual. Indeed, cygnets are among the most beautiful of all baby waterfowl, looking for all the world like gleaming little silvery white powder puffs.

Swans are not difficult to rear. The parents, of course, do the job well. However, aviculturists frequently handrear them, in which event certain guidelines need be observed. As is true with most babies, they need to be kept warm and dry. When hand-reared, they are best maintained away from swimming water until they begin to feather. They should be kept in a confined area to prevent them from wandering off and becoming lost. A secure location on a lawn is excellent. They need to be protected from cold rain or sudden showers. At night they should be brought inside and provided with sufficient heat to ensure warmth. They need to be safeguarded from marauding predators. Drinking water should be provided in poultry drinking founts. All baby waterfowl drink large quantities of water and spend much time dabbling. Water containers must be kept clean and well filled. Food should consist of such poultry supplements as chick and turkey starter. Crumbles or mash are best for new babies, and again — non-medicated. For the first two weeks, the ration can be fairly high in protein — 20 to 30 percent, a level found in most chick grower rations. Swans have a digestive system geared to the intake of large quantities of high fiber, low protein food — specifically, green vegetation. It is important to provide greens.

Some aviculturists feed in shallow pans in which the food is immersed in water. This is unwise. The babies love to dabble in such a mixture, but soon matt themselves with the mix which destroys the insulating ability of the down, allowing them to chill. They learn easily enough to eat their food dry. However, water must be available. The best method is to keep food pans and water founts far enough apart to discourage the babies from dabbling in one and then the other. Cygnets grow rapidly, causing one to forget they are still babies and treat them as adults too quickly. They should be treated as babies and given

special care until they are well feathered.

Most aviculturists pinion waterfowl to render them permanently flightless. This is done by removing the last joint from one wing. During the first day or two after hatching, they can be pinioned without difficulty by snipping off the wing tip with a pair of scissors. When done very early there is very little bleeding and healing is rapid. A blood stopper can be used if needed, but it is usually not necessary. It is important that the wing tip be removed at the proper location. See accompanying sketch.



To pinion newly hatched waterfowl, remove the wing portion as indicated. Pinion one wing only. Pinioned birds will be permanently flightless.

Handreared swans are delightful. Few birds identify with humans more closely. They perceive their keepers as parent figures and interact with them socially. To be accepted by a brood of cygnets on an equal basis is a remarkable experience. The bonding that occurs with babies carries over into adulthood. Visitors to our collection are quite amazed to see swans come when called and demonstrate obvious affection for their keeper. They have a greeting display that is particularly impressive. They move in closely, extend the long graceful necks, then, with considerable wing waving and vocalization, demonstrate their kinship.

All swans are special. However, the favorite from this quarter is the Whistling or Tundra swan. They are not overwhelmingly large, are especially graceful, and, perhaps best of all, identify particularly well with their keeper. ●

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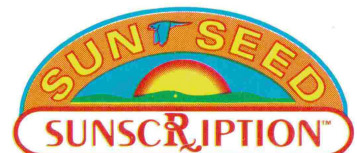
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