



ROYAL SWAN UPPING



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 already have been in existence for many years.

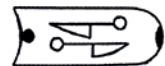
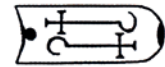
It was desirable to own swans because the young birds, (cygnets), were highly valued for food and often served at banquets and feasts. Each year the families were rounded up during Swan Upping; this was controlled by The Crown and usually took place in late July when the parent birds were in moult and 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, (cob), 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 freely available, swans became less valuable and the importance of Swan Upping diminished. By the 1850s, few people retained their rights to own swans.



Historically, the most common form of identifying the ownership of a swan was to cut marks into the upper mandible. These marks are recorded in the Cantley Roll that was compiled shortly after 1600.



Marks belonging to owners in Northamptonshire and Norfolk. The earliest recorded swan marks of this type date back to about 1400.





Incubation takes about 35 days



When they are very small, the cygnets often ride on their mother's back



Young cygnets are very vulnerable to predators

Swan Upping Today

Today, apart from The Crown, only three bodies have retained their rights to own swans. These are the Ilchester family, which owns the swans breeding in the colony at Abbotsbury, Dorset and the two Livery Companies, the Vintners and Dyers. The Abbotsbury colony has existed since at least the mid-1300s. The Vintners received their rights to own swans in or about 1472 and the Dyers shortly afterwards. 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 takes place 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 with each boat flying the appropriate flags and pennants. Formerly Swan Upping took place between London and Henley, but nowadays the journey begins at Sunbury and ends at Abingdon. The Uppers take five days to cover the 79 miles.

On locating a family of swans, the Uppers give the cry “All-Up!” and the boats converge on the brood and surround it, gradually closing in until the birds can be lifted from the water. The swans are taken 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 Crown’s swans are now left unmarked.





The Crown boats fly the Monarch's cypher



A young cygnet is carefully passed ashore



The Swan Uppers form a circle with their boats to lift the brood safely from the water

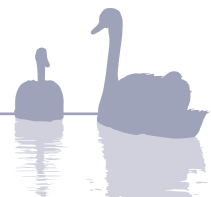
Welfare

Once ashore, the birds are examined by The Queen's Swan Warden for disease or injury. They are also weighed and measured to assess their growth rate. All data is recorded for the future benefit of the swan population.

The most common cause of injury is fishing tackle; swans often swallow baited hooks or swim through fishing lines and become entangled. Some of the more minor injuries can be dealt with on the riverbank, but others, such as a swallowed hook may require an expensive operation and a long period of recuperation, and for this 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 Swan Uppers return the brood to the river, taking care that the cygnets do not become separated from their parents. At this stage, the cygnets are still largely covered with down as they have not yet grown their first feathers.

Throughout the year any injured or sick swans are rescued and taken into care, where they are treated and later released.





Cygnets are weighed and measured as part of their health check



Fishing tackle is the most common cause of injury suffered by mute swans



Young cygnets being checked for injuries

Conservation

Today, 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.

In the past, the Swan Upping census provided a unique record of the number of swans present on the River Thames between London and Henley. Numbers were low at the beginning of the last century and increased 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 breeding pairs with cygnets on the London to Henley stretch, to only 7 in 1985.

Research showed that lead poisoning, largely 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 with 32 breeding pairs with cygnets on this stretch in 2010 and 50 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 recover. 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. Swans need a peaceful riverbank where they can walk in and out of the water and feed on grass. Shallow, sloping banks provide ideal nesting sites, enabling small cygnets to get in and out of the water easily. Unfortunately, the increase in the construction of sheer concrete or steel embankments, together with the increasing number of moored boats, results in many parts of the river providing a difficult place for swans to live. Direct hazards faced by swans include fishing tackle injuries, flying into overhead wires, oil pollution, shootings, vandalism and dog attacks.





The swans and cygnets are carefully returned to the water



It is important that the parent birds and cygnets are released together to avoid any risk of separation



Adult swans can be very protective towards their young

Education

The river and its wildlife provides a valuable amenity for members of the public and it is important that they – and especially the younger generation – appreciate it and learn to respect it.

Swan Uppers regard the opportunity to tell school children about swans as an important element of Swan Upping. The Uppers meet with parties of school children 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 about 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 damaging the habitat and injuring wildlife. It is often possible for the children to witness a catch and then be shown the swans and cygnets at close quarters, which is a new experience for most of them.

The River Thames is not only a place for relaxation and enjoyment; it is important for sustaining wildlife. It is also an essential source of the water consumed by people along its course.





Children view a young cygnet at close quarters



School children participate in a questions and answer session



School children meet Her Majesty The Queen during Swan Upping



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 slightly smaller.

The average clutch size is six eggs; the eggs are laid on alternate days.

Incubation takes about 35 days and starts when the last egg is laid;
as a result, all the cygnets hatch at the same time. The eggs weigh
about 350g each and the newly hatched chicks weigh about 225g each.

The cygnets begin to fly when 4 to 5 months old; those from the earliest
broods may start to fly in September.

The young birds spend their 'teenage' years in flocks where they find a mate
before leaving to search for their own nesting site and territory.

Swans begin to breed when they are 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.



Acknowledgments

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