

# Mute swan



## 1. Life of a mute swan

### 1.1. Common swan names

A female swan is often referred to as a pen and the male as a cob. Young swans are known as cygnets.

### 1.2. Courtship

A three-year old female mute swan met her first mate whilst they were in a winter flock. One of her pastimes was flirting with young cobs and practising courtship rituals such as dipping her head into the water at the same time as a cob's and rubbing heads together.

Eventually they left the flock and flew off to find themselves a suitable territory capable of supporting them and a young family.

They did not breed in the first year and spent their time exploring the territory and defending it against rival mute swans.

### 1.3. Defending a territory

A territory is important to their survival, and they spent a lot of time, particularly early in the year, patrolling it and chasing off other mute swans. Life was very interesting when they approached the boundaries of another mute swan territory.

Her cob had an encounter with a neighbouring cob on their boundary. They were determined to defend their territories. Her cob fluffed up his

feathers, raised his wings and paraded up and down the boundary. His rival did the same, each one waiting to see who would make the first move. Her cob took the initiative and charged the other, flying at him, beating his own feet and wings against the water. On this occasion the rival, who was a younger swan, backed off. If he had not done this, her cob would have wrestled necks with him, beaten him with his wings and given him a good pecking. There are reports of cobs being killed in fights, although this is rare.

A cob will defend his pen against other cobs trying to entice her away from his territory.

Providing there was plenty of food the pair would stay and defend their territory throughout the year.

#### **1.4. Nesting**

They built a nest on a small island in a stream that ran into a river. It was a substantial nest about four metres wide, built to withstand all but the worst floods, with easy access to the water and plenty of nearby vegetation for them to feed on. It was built from rushes and reeds by the female, the male supplying her with materials.

When she was ready she laid an egg on alternate days until there were six in total. One year she laid ten eggs which took her twenty days to complete. When the last egg had been laid she would start their incubation by sitting on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger. During this period, which lasted thirty-five days, she had very little to eat and lost a lot of weight.

After the thirty-five days the cygnets hatched from their eggs.

#### **1.5. Growing up**

The first day or two of the cygnets' lives were spent in the nest with their mother. But they were soon drawn to the water and swimming with the family. The cygnets would be given rides on the backs of their parents to keep them safe from pike, who are capable of swallowing small cygnets whole.

Whilst swimming, their mother would lead the fleet followed by the cygnets and their father bringing up the rear.

At the end of the first week the cygnets could submerge their heads for a couple of seconds and by the end of two weeks they could up-end after plenty of practice, which meant that they could stick their bottom and feet in the air and with their long neck reach well below the surface of the water.

The parents spent most of their time protecting the young, showing them where to look for food, keeping them warm when necessary and in the early days pulling up vegetation or stirring up food from the river bed for them to eat.

Mute swans are normally peaceful birds, but if their eggs or cygnets are threatened they will courageously defend them.

It was about four months before the cygnets learnt to fly.

In September the parents chased the cygnets away and so they flew off to join a large flock of other immature mute swans, probably fifty or sixty in number, who lived close by. Most of them were aged between one and two years and had not bred before.

There was a strict pecking order within the flock. The older cobs were more senior to younger, who in turn were more senior to pens.

## **1.6. Survival**

Generally mute swans mate for life. If a female loses a mate she may return to the flock or look for an unpaired male resident in another territory. The male is more likely to remain in his territory and defend it.

Mute swans face many dangers in growing up. Of an original six cygnets, only three may survive to fledge and by the end of the first year there may only be two left alive.

Cygnets are more vulnerable to a wider range of predators, such as pike, rats and mink. They are more easily chilled if not brooded and less likely to survive if they are separated from the rest of family.

When flying there is the danger of collision with objects such as overhead wires, bridges or boats.

Then there are natural causes such as the river freezing, which makes food inaccessible or dying from a disease.

## **1.7. Dealing with sick cygnets**

The parents would chase away any cygnet that was sick and would not survive. They did not want a sick cygnet passing its disease onto other healthy cygnets.

## **1.8. Human created problems**

Humans can cause problems by shooting at swans, throwing objects at them or damaging nests. Mute swans can get tangled in fishermen's hooks and lines. They have suffered from lead poisoning from fishing weights, although these are now illegal.

Many years ago swans were eaten as a delicacy.

## 2. General data

### 2.1. Identification

<b>Size</b>	Large aquatic birds
<b>Appearance</b>	White with orange-red bills and black mask over the eyes. Long elegant S-shaped necks and pointed tails. Cygnets are a grey-brown colour with a pinkish-grey bill. Young swans are a brownish-grey colour.
<b>Confusion</b>	Unlikely, but watch out for Bewick's swan and whooper swan
<b>Sound</b>	Generally very quiet, but will make a loud hissing sound if made angry.
<b>When</b>	All year
<b>Where</b>	Rivers, lakes, ponds and gravel pits. You may even find them in a field eating grass or crops.
<b>Movement</b>	Swimming. When they take off from water they will run along the surface beating their wings and then gracefully rise into the air. They fly with extended necks and beat their wings slowly and regularly. When they come on to dry land they walk with a waddle.

### 2.2. Feeding

<b>Favourites</b>	Mainly eat plants found in water. Will graze on grass in fields and take bread from humans. Sometimes they will eat small insects and snails.
<b>Habits</b>	Up-end which is good for reaching tubers and roots in shallow water or the tops of plants in deeper water. Dabble which is where swans places their bill horizontally along the water surface and draw water in through their partially opened bill, close it and then squirt water out along the sides of its bill. This filters out small food such as algae and duckweed. Stretch upwards, a bit like a giraffe, to reach crack willow leaves.

**Other**

Cygnets are able to feed themselves from an early age. Unlike many birds parents do not put food into the young's mouth. They would help in the early days by pulling up vegetation which was out of their reach, or by paddling vigorously with their feet to stir up food items from the bottom of the river bed.

### 3. Useful words

#### 3.1. Words about the mute swan

See if you can find the following words in the word search.

Mute, swan, cob, pen, pike, immature, aquatic, filter

A	W	D	V	P	A	N	N	J	B
C	I	X	S	E	I	A	R	O	M
M	V	M	B	N	T	K	C	O	P
U	G	A	M	S	M	O	E	E	L
T	T	T	N	A	G	B	T	F	O
E	Y	E	I	R	T	R	Y	I	P
S	H	U	U	R	U	U	H	L	R
W	Q	U	J	A	Y	F	R	T	E
A	Q	U	A	T	I	C	L	E	F
N	Y	T	S	P	O	O	H	R	G

#### 3.2. Unscramble the following words

ET CY GN	
BM GE ER SU	
ING CK PE	
LE BB DA	
ZA RD HA	
WA LE DD	
GR EF LY AC UL	
ING EX OR PL	
ATE ALT ERN	
U E C L R	

### 3.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about mute swans have a go at answering these questions.

How does a mute swan up-end?

Why do young cygnets take rides on their parents' backs?

Describe how a mute swan takes off from water.

If you were a mute swan parent, why might you chase a sick cygnet away?

List some of the hazards faced by mute swans.

List some of the mute swan's favourite foods.

If you were a mute swan building a nest where would you locate it and why?

As a female mute swan why would you join a flock?