

# Mute Swan



Pair of Mute Swans.  
Photo: Michael Linehan

**Brian Burke** reports on how Ireland's Mute Swan population is faring.

**F**or a bird that is so common and familiar you would think we would know all there is to know about the Mute Swan, but there is still much to learn.

Swans are a part of our history and lore, featuring in stories like the Children of Lir; and it's hard to picture a lake, river or pond in Ireland past or present without a pair of Mute Swans quietly swimming across its surface.

## Is it really native?

It comes as a surprise to many, then, that there is still confusion and debate over whether the Mute Swan is actually native to Ireland.

The somewhat 'sudden' appearance of Mute Swan in Ireland around Norman times may have been due to its introduction for use as a food item or for 'decoration' on ornamental ponds, or possibly just down to better protection and management after they were hunted to extinction in many parts of the country before then.

Research has confirmed that our Mute Swans are genetically identical to those in Britain, though it is impossible to say whether they made their way here naturally or were introduced.

Swan bones have been found at archaeological sites in Ireland, but some experts remain sceptical that these are Mute Swan bones and suspect they might be from Whooper Swans (winter migrants to Ireland).

Mute Swan bones found in East Anglia and dating back 6,000 years put to rest the idea that the Romans introduced it to Britain, though the Romans were probably responsible for bringing it to semi-domesticated status.

Our proximity to Britain, our abundance of suitable breeding and wintering habitat and the ability of Mute Swans to migrate all suggest probable natural colonisation in the past.

## Distribution and numbers

Mute Swans are common across the temperate Palearctic, from western Europe across to north-east China. They were introduced to north-eastern states of the USA in the 1800s to adorn city parks and large estates and they are now a problematic invasive species there.

Some populations are migratory, but those in Ireland and the UK are sedentary, probably owing to our mild winters.

In Ireland, winter wetland surveys have found a 43% increase in Mute Swans since the late 1980s and we now have over 9,000, though their numbers are likely to be underestimated due to their dispersed distribution across the country.

## Factfile

**Common name:** Mute Swan

**Scientific name:** *Cygnus olor*

**Irish name:** Eala Bhalbh

**Individuals:** Cob (male), pen (female), cygnet (juvenile)

**Group name:** Herd

**Irish population:** >9,000 individuals, Amber-listed, stable trend.

**European population:** 167,000-231,000 individuals, bird of least concern, increasing trend.

## FEEDING SWANS: NO BREAD, PLEASE!

If you feed swans, it is best to give them *natural* rather than processed foods. Poor nutrition from over-reliance on white bread can lead to conditions such as 'angel wing' in Mute Swans, where the birds' wings become twisted and deformed, or 'pink-feather disease,' where pinkish brown patches develop on the wing-tips, making the feathers brittle and unable to repel water.

Research by scientists in UCC found that pink-feather disease is caused when swans get the fungus *Chrysonilia sitophila* on their bills from mouldy bread; they then transfer this fungal growth onto their wings and plumage when they preen. With this in mind, the best foods to give swans are **oats, corn, defrosted frozen peas, chopped salad leaves or grapes cut in half.**



Mute Swans at Broadmeadow estuary, Co Dublin, one of the many places where bird-lovers feed swans. Photo: John Fox



Improvements to water quality in wetlands and warmer winter weather increasing their survival rates are likely to have been important contributory factors in the increase in numbers.

The Irish population is considered distinct from that in Britain, despite a small number of recorded movements across the Irish Sea. The species is Amber-listed here due to the international importance of our population.

Our swans do move around a bit, for example moving to traditional moulting sites in late summer and making localised movements to coastal sites in winter. Irish Mute Swans actually move further (on average) than British birds due to larger distances between flocks.

## Breeding habits

Male and female Mute Swans can be distinguished by the larger knob found at the base of the male's upper mandible. This knob increases in size during the breeding season.

Mute Swans will nest on almost any type of waterbody, from ponds to lakes, rivers, marshes, islands and estuarine shores, as long as there is vegetation nearby for feeding and they have easy access to and from the water from the nest. A study of Dublin swans in the 1980s found that 99% of pairs bred at the same site the following year and there was an annual divorce rate of only 3%.

Mute Swans are highly territorial and will even maintain territory throughout the year to avoid losing it. Despite this, some have been found breeding in colonies, for example in counties Donegal and Wexford.



Mute Swan with yellow leg-ring.  
Photo: Michael Linehan

## RINGING STUDIES

Studies of Mute Swans in the Greater Dublin Area have been going on for several decades, thanks in particular to the efforts of Richard Collins and, more recently, Graham Prole, Sean Kingston and the Irish Midlands Ringing Group.

More recently, the research has been extended to include north Wicklow and east Kildare. It aims to carry out annual censuses of breeding swans, record clutch sizes and numbers of cygnets and compare these figures with historical data to see how the population is faring.

Many swans have been ringed and it is hoped that this will shed light on survival rates, pair and territory fidelity, post-breeding movements and dispersal of juvenile swans. Additional data gathered during ringing include ageing information, size, weight and the presence or absence of pink-feather disease.

Most of the ringed swans have been fitted with coloured leg-rings. The most recent rings are yellow with four letters which are easily read from a distance (with the aid of a telescope), even when they are in the water (see photo).

➔ The Irish Midlands Ringing Group would welcome any reports of Mute Swan nests and ringed swans. Please email any information to [mute.swan.ring@gmail.com](mailto:mute.swan.ring@gmail.com).

MICHAEL LINEHAN



Mute Swans graze on aquatic vegetation, including pondweed in freshwater bodies and eelgrass, tasselweeds and green algae in salt water. However, on land they will feed on grass and crops, including winter cereals.

On average, Mute Swans will first breed at four years of age and they live to around ten years of age. The oldest wild Mute Swan recorded by the British and Irish ringing scheme lived to over 29 years, when it died after a collision with powerlines. In Denmark, where the Mute Swan is the national bird, one swan recently lived to over 40 years.

As well as collisions with powerlines, the ingestion of lead from spent gunshot and anglers' weights have been a significant cause of mortality in swans in the past, either directly through lethal poisoning or indirectly through

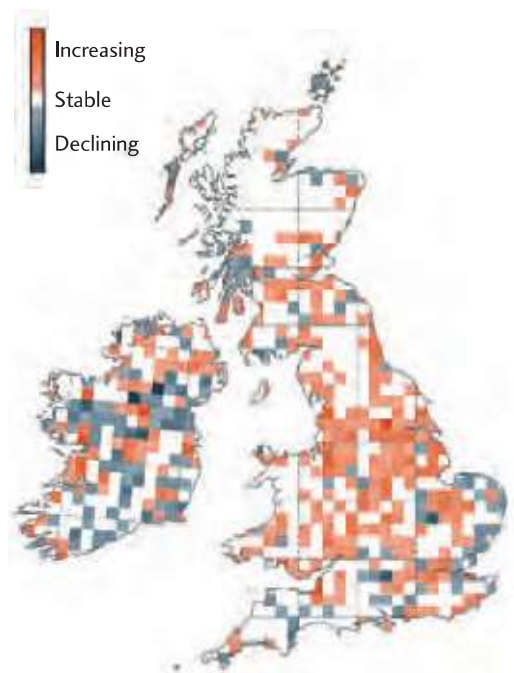
sub-lethal effects that made birds more prone to collisions or less able to cope in cold conditions.

In Ireland, they have no real predators, though foxes or dogs may attack unhealthy swans, and pike and mink will take young cygnets.

## Some myths debunked

Despite the name, Mute Swans are not quite mute and communicate with grunting noises, or warn away unwelcome swans or potential predators with aggressive hisses. The phrase 'swansong' was based on the incorrect belief that Mute Swans only sang at the moment before death.

There is an old myth that a swan can break a human's arm, if provoked. In reality, an adult swan will hiss, flap and maybe peck if you are posing a threat to its eggs or chicks, but nothing more than that. Were it to hit you with its wings, it would probably do more damage to itself than to you. Like all birds, swans' bones have a honeycomb-like structure to make them as light as possible and able to fly ... at weights of up to 12kg a swan needs all the help it can get to become airborne.



Mute Swan relative breeding abundance change between the breeding Atlas periods of 1988-1991 and 2008-2011. Source: *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, courtesy of BTO. It appears that decline is more pronounced in Ireland than in Britain at present.