



# ROYAL SWAN UPPING



**For primary school children**

Aged 8-11 years

# What is Swan Upping?

Many years ago, swans were very important as a source of food which made them valuable. The only people who were allowed to eat swans were the King or Queen and those members of the nobility who were given permission to own swans by the Crown. Swan Upping began in the 12th Century and was the method by which the Crown recorded the ownership of mute swans and their cygnets in England. Today it is against the law to eat swans and they are a protected species. The main purpose of Swan Upping in the present day is to monitor the health and well-being of mute swans on the River Thames to ensure they continue to survive into the future.



## What are they called and how large are they?

The adult male swan is called a cob. The adult female swan is called a pen and she is usually slightly smaller than the cob. Baby swans are called cygnets. An adult swan can weigh up to 15 kg and their wing-span can reach up to 2.3 metres.



## How do they fly?

The swan has two main types of feathers; flight feathers and contour feathers. The large feathers shown in the photograph are the flight feathers that enable the swan to fly. For many hundreds of years these feathers were used as quills, (pens), for writing; their use gradually died out in the 1800's with the introduction of steel pen nibs.



## How do they keep warm?

Contour feathers are the small feathers that keep swans warm and dry. You can see how thick they are in the photograph.



## The swan's nest

Swans make their nests from dried reeds that they collect from the river bank during April and May each year. The female will lay an average of 6 eggs, with one egg being laid every other day. When the clutch of eggs is complete, the pen will sit on the eggs to keep them warm for approximately 35 days. This is called the incubation period, after which the cygnets will hatch together.



## **25 Protecting their young**

Very young cygnets will often climb onto their mother's back to keep warm. Here, they are also protected from predators including foxes, birds of prey and large fish called pike.



## **26 What do they eat?**

The natural food for swans is vegetation that grows in the river. The parents pull weed from the bottom of the river for their cygnets to feed on.



## **27 Pollution**

Pollution is a serious problem and comes in many forms including sewerage, pesticides, oil, plastics and a variety of other rubbish that people throw into the water. All of these are disastrous for the wildlife that lives on our waterways and rivers. This photograph shows a swan with a metal wire champagne bottle top caught around its tongue and beak. This prevented the swan from being able to eat and it would have died if the bottle top had not been removed.



## **28 Ownership of Swans**

The Royal Swan Marker and Swan Uppers work for Her Majesty The Queen, who has the right to claim ownership of any unmarked mute swan swimming in open waters. However, Her Majesty mainly exercises this right on certain stretches of the River Thames. There are also two London Livery Companies, (historical trade organisations), the Vintners and the Dyers, that possess a Royal charter enabling them to own swans on the River Thames since the 15th century.



## **29 The journey up river**

The Swan Uppers travel 79 miles up river from Sunbury-on-Thames near London, to Abingdon in Oxfordshire. This journey takes 5 days. The men travel in boats called skiffs; they are made of wood and are propelled through the water with oars. Her Majesty's boats fly flags showing The Queen's cypher, (EIIR), and the men wear The Queen's uniform.



## 210 **Swan catch**

To catch a family of swans, the rowing boats, (skiffs), are positioned in a large circle around the swans and cygnets. The men in the boats gradually pull them closer together, making the circle around the swans smaller until the Swan Uppers can reach the swans and lift them from the water.



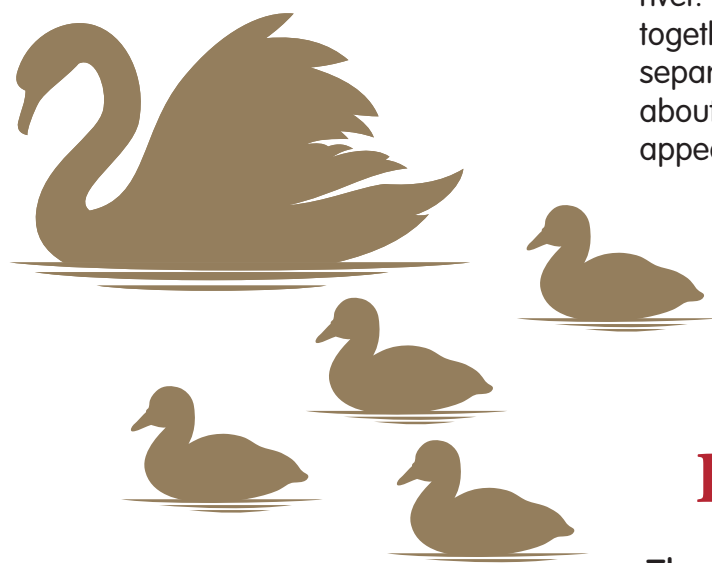
## 211 **The health check**

The adult swans and their young cygnets have their legs and wings tied with very soft string in a knot called a bow; this allows the swans and cygnets to be handled gently. They are placed carefully on the river bank. The cygnets are weighed and measured and their details are recorded by The Queen's Swan Warden. The swans and cygnets are checked for signs of injury or ill health. Cygnets are very vulnerable to being hurt by fishing hooks and lines and if any of the swans or cygnets require veterinary attention they receive treatment before being released back onto the river.



## 212 **Back to the water**

Once they have been checked, and their details recorded, the family of swans is released back to the river. It is very important that they are all released together in order to avoid the cygnets becoming separated from their parents. Cygnets learn to fly at about 5-6 months of age and white feathers start appearing from about Christmas time.



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