

SWANS & GEESE – WHITE, GREY & BLACK

WHO?

WHITE: **Mute Swan** (Resident, Common), **Whooper Swan** (Winter, rare in East Norfolk), **Bewick Swan** (Winter – often in Broadland) –

(**New Zealand BLACK SWAN:** introduced but rare; one on Broads)

GREY: **Greylag Goose** (Resident, Common), **Pink-Footed Goose** (Winter, Norfolk, in their 100s if you can find them!), **White-Fronted Goose** (winter, rare), **Bean Goose** (Winter, rare)

BLACK (+ grey or white, etc): **Canada Goose** (Resident, less than Greylags in Norfolk), **Brent Goose** (Winter, North Norfolk), **Barnacle Goose** (Winter, some in Norfolk), **Egyptian Goose** (actually a Shelduck! – Resident in Broadland, rare in the rest of the country: originally introduced; now feral.)

QUICK HINTS: (These are not to replace bird identification books but to point out MAIN I.D. POINTS, and introduce you to bird folklore.) Right place? Right season? Right shape? Right noise? What to look for when you only have a glance...

Mute Swan: [Anglo-Saxon: swan (still used) = sounder (sound or sonnet – sound of its wings in flight. Male: cob; female: pen; young: cygnet.)]

When: RESIDENT

Where: Common on all types of water: smooth rivers, lakes, ponds, reservoirs, park pools; also, at times and in places, on the sea.

Colour:

- White, often with yellowish neck;
- **JUVS:** medium brown, becomes mottled; moults white through winter (the ‘Ugly duckling’ story)

Bills:

- Adults – orange bill.
- **MALES:** LARGE BLACK KNOB;
- **FEMALES:** SMALL BLACK KNOB AT TOP OF BILL!
- **JUVs:** dull grey-brown, turns pink, black at base

Shape:

- HUGE; GRACEFUL ‘S’ CURVED NECK.
- Neat feathers; square head, thick neck crown (like blackbird)
- Tail relatively long and pointed – recognise it when up-ending.

Flight:

- They need a long runway to take off, running on the surface of the water.
- Once airborne, they are a beautiful sight. Mostly slow and low (though they can fly high)
- The whoosh of their wings is nothing like any other bird and gave them the name ‘swan’.
- Only swan to make that whistle-hum noise.
- It apparently inspired Wagner’s: *Ride of the Valkyries*
- When they come into land (on water) they ski in with feet well forward.
- Having landed, they flap their wings, shake and preen, as though embarrassed by the unceremonious way they arrived.

Seen:

- Everywhere. Nearly all the swans you see are Mute Swans. Huge flock in Wroxham.

- They mostly keep in their family groups, even when mixing with other swans.
- Look for the adult pair by knobs (large and small) on 'foreheads', purer white.
- Guards family: Male often swimming with wings gracefully arched as a warning to the others that he has a family with him.
- Chicks will ride on mother's back, so she can feed. Father also carries chicks for protection.
- Cygnets in various states of dappled grey-white. Check them out by black bill with touch of pink-orange starting to show over winter.
- When adults start to breed again, the first-year juvs will flock together – teenage freedom!
- Nests in platform of twigs on island or floating. It maybe 4 metres across at base. Both birds build it, and keep it as their territory.
- Wasteful feeders, pulling up more waterweed than they need. This is used by smaller water birds who can't reach that deep: so they can be surrounded by gadwall, mallard. Pochard, coot, though they can dive for food.
- A swan can up-end (like a handstand) and reach 90cm. (gives an idea of water-depth)
- Grazes on short grass, so there is usually access from water nearby.

Territorial: *Wing Arch to make himself even bigger: the only swan to do so:*

- When feeling threatened, they give themselves space, by almost standing up on the water and flapping their wings.
- A swan threatening another bird arches his wings over his back; arches his thickish neck and swims really fast towards them like a torpedo. This is usually enough for the other bird (swan or goose) to get out of the way.
- They can also stand up on water wings raised; nest against puffed up chest, and charge with two-footed walking swim; harshly hissing loudly.
- Long necks: VERY LONG; THICK AND STRONG – If the threat does not go away, the swan has no qualms in stretching out his neck and giving a good peck.
- Male swans don't often fight together, but when they do, it is quite vicious with twisted necks, pecks that hold onto the other bird and vicious wing pushes, both rising in the water.
 - It rarely lasts long as the stronger and more determined bird soon has the other swimming away and wagging its tail. Soon both are preening and calming down.
 - Triumphant Male ceremony, returning to nest: lifting chin, ruffling feathers, bonding.
- DANGER: A pair of swans with young can attack anything, including humans and particularly dogs. On land they are man-height when they want to be and their wings can knock down a child. RESPECT THEM, AND SEE OTHERS DO, TOO!

Feeding them: Their beaks, though strong and raspy-rough, don't really hurt if you are feeding them. They are tame enough to feed from your hand, and are persistent; give them a large piece of bread, so you can hold one end and them the other. If they get too annoying, trying to grab the whole loaf, ignore them and throw bread further away. They are intelligent and will get the point.

Voice: not mute! Though quiet.

- A quiet but explosive snort.
- They hiss and grunt occasionally; whistle and quietly trumpet and bubble.
- Cygnets use musical cheep when following parents.
- A lonely swan gives gull-like 'ga-oh' to find others.
- Alarm = yelp (immature)
- Their haunting thrum of wing beats are both display signals and replace flight calls (hence 'mute').

Interesting Facts:

- They are protected and all belong to the CROWN. 'Swan Upping' on the Thames: when swans are ceremoniously caught and marked. It goes back to the time when a swan was the centrepiece in a King's feast and its meat a delicacy. They are not now eaten.
- They mate for life. Only 3% divorce.
- They first meet their future partners in the 'Non-Breeding flocks'; a two-year period of mid-childhood and adolescence.
 - And then have a year's engagement, when they might change their minds.
 - A Male with his first chicks could be a 4 year-old.

- An unengaged 3 year-old female might team up with an older widower or divorcee, with experience of breeding.
- They will continue to court every spring into early summer:
 - Head-turning: face each other, breasts nearly touching, neck-feathers ruffled, arch necks into heart-shape; shake heads, look into partner's eyes.
 - Copulation just for pleasure – not for breeding – throughout life.
 - They both look after young together. Male protects and parents. Female nurtures. Both incubate (male only when female feeds).
- Life-span: about 10 years – one known to live to 26 years.
- Much poetry written about the beauty of the swan
- 'A travelling spirit': the dead are said to become – or are carried by – swans to heaven
- To kill a swan will bring bad luck – even death – to the killer
- Many legends of people turning into swans
- Swansong: legend back to Pliny, Plato and Socrates, says that a dying swan trumpets a sweet song. No scientific proof of this, but it has become an idiomatic expression.
- Summer: 6,400 pairs; Winter: 79,000 swans

Whooper Swan: [Whooper = the double note cry. Whistling Swan; Wild Swan (Suffolk) Elerch (Cornwall); Elk (Yorks, Northumberland).]

When: *RARE BUT REGULAR WINTER* MIGRANT from Iceland. (Oct-Feb)

Where: Open waters and reserves. Grazing on flooded meadows. Comes back to same areas.

Colour: white, but may have brown-stained neck and head; wedge-shaped beak (like Roman nose). Mostly yellow coming to a point at black tip. Juv: pale grey; bill off-white coming to pink tip.

Shape: HUGE; HOLDS ITS NECK STRAIGHT. BIGGER THAN BEWICK (Whooper a wopper!)

Flight: slow, steady flight; but very noisy single 'hoop's, especially on take-off and landing. They migrate and stay in family units.

Voice: Very noisy. Bugles. A low 'kloo-kloo-kloo' (three notes). Sounds rather like Canada Goose. Pairs display vocally in duet in the 'Triumph Ceremony'. Male song = musical series of 7 notes.

Interesting Facts:

- Breeds in Icelandic Tundra
- 1972 (Finnish composer) Einojuhani Rautavaara: concerto for birds includes recording of Whooper Swan.
- Its eggs are the largest 125mm long
- They live for about 9 years, despite migrations. Longest = 23 years.
- Whooper Swans have been seen flying at 8,000 metres high (greater airspeed: less oxygen); air temperature = -42 deg Centigrade! Considerable energy in climbing to these heights.
- It is one of the heaviest birds to migrate = 14kg.
- Summer: 9-14 pairs; winter: 15,000 swans

Bewick Swan: [Cygnus bewickii Named after Thomas Bewick, 1830. Bird Illustrator. 'Tame Swan' (Sussex).]

When: *RARE BUT REGULAR WINTER* MIGRANT from Siberia (Nov-Feb)

Where: grazing on fields in specific areas of North-East Norfolk. Also on open water on certain reserves such as Slimbridge; mixes with other swans. In flocks but stay in family group (see Mute).

Colour: adults white; small yellow square patch above black bill. Juv: dingy grey-white, pinkish bill

Shape: VERY LARGE; HOLDS ITS short thick NECK STRAIGHT ; SMALLER VERSION OF WHOOPER. Shortish tail.

Flight: slow, steady flight; noisy calling, especially on take-off and landing. In family units.

Voice: like Whooper: yaps and honks can be heard from afar – higher pitched. Single or double notes.

Seen: *Rarely in large groups. LOOK FOR ONE OR TWO, OCCASIONALLY THREE in the fields.*

Interesting Facts:

- Breeds in Arctic Tundra in Siberia
- Lives like Whooper about 9 years despite migration. Longest = 20 years.

- The faithful Bewick has 1% divorce rate: when it is widowed, it remains single for many years before it thinks of taking another partner. (Human divorce in 2000AD = 40%)
- Bewicks have been recorded migrating at 40 mph. They use a flapping flight (not soaring).
- The bill-pattern is like a fingerprint for Bewicks, each individual having a different pattern.
- At Slimbridge, their individual histories are plotted.
- Winter: 7,000 swans.

New Zealand Black Swan (from Australia): included because at least one can be seen in the Broads.

When: About 45-50 Black Swans living wild in the UK. Originally escapees from parks, they have established themselves in certain areas. The most famous colony is in Dawlish, Devon, which has it as its crest. One or two are to be found on the Broads (numbers kept low because they can be very vicious particularly when nesting). They also fight each other. Look on Salhouse Broad or nearby.

Where: Smooth rivers, Broads; at times and in specific places, on the sea, or in estuaries (Dawlish).

Colour: Appears All-Black, but has wide white wing-margins in flight. Red beak and red-black legs.

Shape: GRACEFUL CURVED NECK (longest of all swans), held in 'S' shape; smaller bird than Mute Swan, but can also arch wings in defence.

Flight: slow, steady flight; will 'play' in the thermals. Wings have large fingers.

Voice: It bugles. When its nest is threatened, it hisses, viciously.

Seen: *Rarely in large groups. LOOK FOR ONE OR TWO, OCCASIONALLY THREE in the fields.*

Feeding: *vegetarian:* beak can reach the bottom in shallow water with body flat on water; upends in deeper water.

Interesting Facts:

- It was hunted to extinction in New Zealand. In 1860s, a 100 brought over from Australia, however, that seemed to have triggered many others to fly over independently.
- It is the state bird of Western Australia.
- The population in Britain is not considered to be self-sustaining and so the species is not afforded admission to the official British List. 9 breeding pairs in 2001.
- However, BTO say they have doubled in the last five years and are breeding in numerous sites so could soon be considered for the list.
- They could become a threat to the gentle Mute Swan, competing for food, and attacking birds and humans.
- There is a chance they could interbreed (tried in captivity): the result = A Bhute Swan!

Greylag Goose: [Old English: Gos (became goose and gosling = 'ing'(little). Grey Lag-goose = last to leave for breeding grounds: or it grazed the lea (field): 'Wild Goose; Fen Goose; Marsh Goose; Stubble Goose (Lothian); Grey Goose.

When: RESIDENT; small migrant flock in Scotland.

Where: Common on all types of water: large lakes, gravel pits, farmland, marshes, often in huge numbers. Breeding birds in Northern Scotland are truly wild and nest on moors, marshes and lakes. Icelandic wild migrating birds winter in Scotland.

Colour: grey goose: pink legs, orange bill.

Shape: Two toned GREY-brown feathers; huge orange bill and legs; thick neck, can see eye; bars on flanks; 'grooves' on side of neck' (Juvs don't have either so look scaly);

Flight: Often fly in 'V' formation; look heavy; Upper wing pale grey with brown panel, Underwing: pale near body. Very thick neck, huge bill, broad, blunt-ended wings. 'Whiffling' (drop-from-air) descent. Powerful flight but looks hard work. Takes a long run and takes off with some difficulty.

Voice: Distinctive nasal cackle and grating call.

Feeding: probes in mud for food; up-ends in water which it prefers (unlike others)

Seen: *Always someone on watch when feeding. The Greylag, Canada and Egyptian are the only geese to be seen in summer, so all GREY geese are Greylags. You can here them cry out at night in the Broads when disturbed.*

Interesting Facts:

- Life-span: 6-11 years: record = 18 years.
- In Egypt, there are tomb paintings of migrating Greylag Geese.

- They fly in V-shaped formation so that the birds behind the leader can use its slipstream to reduce drag. This can save 15-20% of energy.
- After a while, the leader usually drops back so another bird takes over the lead. As they travel in groups of a number of families, there are enough leaders to take turns.
- There can be many 'V's or chevrons in the sky, or maybe just artistic wiggly lines of geese.
- A flock of geese on the ground is a 'gaggle of geese': the same geese in the air are a 'skein of geese'!
- They are the ancestors of all Domestic Geese and look very 'meaty', hence, white and part white geese. These are the RESIDENTS.
- Goose, gander, goslings: goosey, goosey, gander...
- They had symbolism with sun (high flight) and fertility (back to early Egyptians)
- Summer: 46,000 pairs (3,200 wild); Winter: 230,000 (85,000 wild)

Pink-Footed Goose: [Grey Goose (Sussex); Long-Billed Goose (Yorkshire)]

When: WINTER: Nov-March. In Norfolk, they usually arrive and leave together in huge skeins, up to 40,000 at a time.

Where: They commute between open-water roosts and farmland feeding areas, at dusk and dawn.

Colour: GREY WITH DARK HEAD. Pink legs and feet and on small bill; pale breast; short neck, rounded head; frosty grey back, different from warm brown Greylags. Some grooves on thin neck.

Shape: small, compact goose

Flight: untidy skeins; family groups within skein; some 'V' formation, some wavy lines; AMAZING SIGHT IN Norfolk And Scotland. THEY FLY HIGHER THAN GREYLAGS. Dark underwing; pale upperwing – opposite to Greylags. Head a 'blob' on short thin neck, small bill visible. Fuid wing-beats, quickest of the 'grey' geese. Incessant noise... the first thing you notice.

Voice: different – higher than Greylag honk. Say quickly: 'ang-ang-WINK-WINK' – becomes a roar from huge flocks.

Feeding: Mainly on land. Feeds faster than Bean.

Seen: **Huge skeins in fields. Amazingly in poor light, they can blend in with earth. You think there are a few, then realise they are dotted all over two huge fields. They are nervous though, and will take off and fly further away if they see you. SO STAY IN THE CAR – IT MAKES A GOOD HIDE FOR ALL BIRDS!**

Interesting Facts:

- Life-span: 6-11 years: record = 38 years!
- They arrive in November in huge skeins and can pass overhead all day, right here in north-east Norfolk – you will never forget the sight and sound of them. Loose skeins of them: a musical cacophony of high cries. When they arrive, they drop out of the sky straight onto their destination (called 'wiffling'). They do this also to and from their feeding grounds on sugarbeet fields and their roost sites (eg: The Wash) at dawn and dusk.
- On moonlit nights, they may stay on the fields; with certain geese on watch for predators.
- Geese eat constantly, so they have enough stored body fat even after migration to egg-lay.
- Winter: 360,000 geese.

White-Fronted Goose: [White-faced Goose (more accurate); Bald Goose; Laughing Goose; Tortoiseshell Goose (Ireland)]

When: WINTER VISITOR (Dec): UNCOMMON.

Where: South-West England. On farmland fields, ploughed fields, near marshes. Roosts close by.

Colour: Grey-brown goose: Pink bill. Legs orange-red. White 'Blaze on forehead. Dark brown splotches on belly

Shape: Medium sized, stocky, Larger and longer than Pink-footed goose;

Flight: looks deep-chested, narrow wings, large square head with white blaze (adults), thicker neck.

Voice: two notes, yelping laugh.

Seen: ***Often mixed with other geese.***

Interesting Facts:

- Ours come from Russia. In small flocks, family parties.
- These are also painted in Egyptian tombs arriving from migration.
- Named White-fronted in 1766 by Thomas Pennant.

- Winter: 16,000 geese.

Bean Goose: [Corn Goose; Wild Goose (Scotland, Ireland); Small Grey Goose; Grey Goose (Sussex)]

When: WINTER: from November - March

Where: feeds on fields with other geese. South-west Scotland + East Anglia (particularly Yare Valley).

Colour: 'Dark Grey' goose: Orange legs; orange-black bill, white bars are more obvious. Dark head and neck, pale breast.

Shape: wedge-shaped head and bill; flat crown.

Flight: shyer than most, taking flight at the slightest hint of danger. Smaller flocks than others. Not particularly noisy. Long wings.

Voice: Deep bassoon-like, soft HONK.

Seen: in smaller flocks than others.

Interesting Facts:

- Two types: 'Tundra' & 'Taiga' – most are Taiga here.
- Named by Edwards after the bean fields they liked
- Only 730 geese in winter.

Canada Goose: [Cravat Goose (Southern Scotland)]

When: RESIDENT

Where: Common, widespread. Acts as if it owns the place. Parks, ponds, farmland, wetlands, estuaries.

Colour: black neck, white face-patch (a 'cut-itself-shaving' bandage!), black bill and legs. Scaly brown patterned back. Goslings: yellow-green.

Shape: very large, long-necked.

Flight: Slow, swan-like wing-beats. Magnificent flight, not much above treetops.

Voice: very noisy: discordant, 2-note 'ah-HONK' in flight, in greeting, in disputes.

Seen: regularly feeding in water, head-dipping like swan. Very sociable. Constantly bickers, head-down shouting matches or splashing in the water. Grazes on grass and swims in water. Or standing around.

Interesting Facts:

- It was introduced to Britain from Canada and America in the 17th Century and an ideal guest, smart, well-behaved and stayed within the grounds of a few stately homes. In the last 50 years, its population has increased. It is not so numerous in the Broads area, but in some parts of the country it is not at all popular, particularly as it is inclined to ruin the grass areas round ornamental lakes and park ponds. It can damage crops, but is not a threat to other wildlife. It is noisy, messes up the grass and can be intimidating, but so can swans and other wildlife and many of them were introduced at one time or another.
- Goslings gathered into 'crèches'; I've seen a greylag looking after her goslings and a Canada gosling at Wroxham Broad.
- No fear of people.
- In summer, 62,000 pairs in UK. In winter, 190,000.

Brent Goose: [From its cry: Rott Goose; Rat Goose; Road Goose; Rood Goose; Clatter Goose (East Lothian); Quink Goose; Crocker; Brand Goose.]

When: WINTER Oct-April or May.

Where: Mostly on mudflats and saltmarshes.

Colour: Oily black with blazing white bottom. White 'necklace' in autumn.

Shape: Small the size of a mallard. Compact, short thick neck.

Flight: in wavy, irregular lines. Narrower wings than other geese, much quicker wing-beats. (like Mallard)

Voice: Throaty, rolling gargle; crescendo at take-off.

Seen: Likes swimming and upending in water for eel-grass. Grazes in grassy areas. Mostly near sea.

Interesting Facts:

- Three types: 'Dark-bellied'; 'Pale-Bellied'; Black Brant' (rare from USA), large white necklace. Dark with white flank and bottom.
- Life-span: 6-11 years: record = 28 years.

- Brent geese migrating from Alaska to Mexico (through USA) achieved average speeds in different years, of between 35 and 50 mph
- As we witnessed in Cley, a predator like a buzzard or harrier or even a sparrowhawk can cause panic even with big birds like the Brent Geese that are too large to be prey, and they will all take to the skies in mass. The Brents flew in a murmuration presumably to confuse the predators with their combined size... some 1000-1500 birds!
- Often very tame, at Wells-next-the-Sea, I have had them walking round my feet and ignoring me.
- Their feathers were used for quill pens – hence the ink named after the Quink Geese.
- Winter: 120,000 geese.

Barnacle Goose: [Bar Goose (Essex); Clakis, Claik (Scotland); White-Faced Barnacle; Norway Barnacle (Ireland); Rood Goose; Routhecock (Orkney); Tree Goose.]

When: WINTER mostly. (Oct-Mar)

Where: saltmarshes and fields. Mainly Western Scotland and Ireland. Feral birds in Norfolk are resident.

Colour: black neck and crown, but white face. Small black bill. The black on neck reaches down to lower breast; black bands on wings. Prefers land to water.

Shape: small and shorter necked than Canada.

Flight: flies in lines or 'U' shape. Less shy, distinctly pointed wings. Slower wing-beats than Brent. Flies higher than Brent of Canada.

Voice: yaps like small dogs.

Seen: very sociable, large flocks.

Interesting Facts:

- Legend said to come from the barnacles that formed in trees, fell into the sea and became fowl.
- Summer: 1,000 (feral) birds; winter: 94,000.

Egyptian Goose: Related to the Shelduck not geese.

When: RESIDENT

Where: Common in the fields in north-east Norfolk. Usually in pairs or small family groups. They blend in amazingly well, despite their attractive colouring. Nests holes in bank, under bushes, even in trees!

Colour: Long pink legs. Brown 'Shades' round eyes; dark brown spot on breast, dirty neck, pinkish plumage, darker back, with russet wings. Unmistakable. In flight, clean white inner-wing patch, above and below.

Shape: Small goose, heavy body.

Flight: in small parties, low. Heavy flight on broad wings

Voice: wheezing call.

Seen: *Rarely in large groups. LOOK FOR ONE OR TWO, OCCASIONALLY THREE in the fields.*

Interesting Facts:

- Introduced from Africa in 1700s, it has escaped in 1960s in north-east Norfolk to become truly a wild bird, breeding well, not seen in many other areas except in wildlife centres.
- Summer: 1,100 pairs; Winter: 3,400 geese.