

Wyre Forest Study Group

An autumn in the company of Bewdley's Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*)

ROSEMARY WINNALL



Mute Swan family, Bewdley, 20th July 2021. The cob leading the way.

Rosemary Winnall

Swans, with their air of elegance and grace, are familiar to most people, and have been celebrated for thousands of years in myths, legends, music, literature, dance, art and astronomy. I remember in the 1970s hearing about the discovery of a Mesolithic burial site near Vedebaek in Denmark which included the grave of a young mother and her premature baby. What especially touched me was that about 6,000 years ago this tiny infant had been laid to rest cradled on a swan's wing.

I grew up in Swansea (where else!) with several misconceptions about swans:

- Mute Swans are mute,
- all swans belong to the Queen, and
- they are dangerous and can break a man's leg with their wing.

The name Swansea has nothing to do with birds and is derived from the name of a Viking King and the only 'swans' we ever saw were children's pedaloes on the local boating lake. So, I had a lot to learn about our resident Mute Swans.

In 2021 my husband and I moved to Bewdley, close to the River Severn. Travel restrictions were still in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic and so I started to watch the river birds on my doorstep. We were regularly alerted to swans flying over our garden by the enigmatic musical humming of their wings, and in the summer I saw a pen swimming with her cygnets on her back, evidence of her parental care. When I spotted a swan standing on the shingle bank sporting a bright orange leg-ring I was eager to find out more. The unique code on each of these Davic colour rings is easy to read with binoculars, particularly when the swan is out of the water or close to the quayside. By reporting their presence, we can add to the knowledge about their life histories and movements. I soon found this website:

European Colour-ring Birding in Europe <https://cr-birding.org> and my compulsive autumn project began.

My checklist of colour-ringed Mute Swans soon increased. Each new bird was photographed together with a close up of its ring. I was able to discover the name of the swan ringer, make contact to pass on my record and obtain more information about previous sightings. I soon had details of about 30 different Mute Swans. Table 1 provides information from the ringers, with their permission, about each Bewdley bird, providing fascinating insights into their life histories.



Swan 10R 23 years old

Rosemary Winnall

10R is extra-special as she is 23 years old, one of the oldest known Mute Swans in the county. Until I recorded her in 2021 no-one had reported her since 2016. Swans 63L and her partner (likely to be 54J who has lost his ring) have nested and brought up young on Bewdley's Northwood Lane pool for the last five years and are very successful parents. 45T and 45N are mates and they were not so competent as, in 2021, their three remaining cygnets were not flourishing and had to be taken into care. David Atkinson is the bird ringer who

Wyre Forest Study Group

Table 1. Mute Swans In Bewdley in the autumn of 2021				
Ring code	Sex	Age 2021	Ringer	History from ringers
10R	Pen	23	DA	One of the oldest swans in the county, ringed in 1998 at Bewdley. After not being seen for many years, she turned up in Bewdley 20/11/2015, but hadn't been seen since 2016.
30V	Cob	8	DA	Ringed as a one year old in Worcester on 21/04/2014. Seen there on 15/05/2019 and in Priorslee Lake, Telford 07/07/2019.
38P	Pen	6	DA	Ringed as a cygnet at Hagley, on a small pool at Great Match Farm 07/09/2015. This swan was rescued by Wychbold Swan Rescue in 2020 and eventually released at Worcester.
41T	Pen	5	DA	Ringed as a cygnet at Holt 30/8/2016, sibling of 45T. Spends most of her time in Worcester, but occasionally seen in Bewdley. She had a bad neck injury three years ago and had to be rescued.
43U	Pen	5	DA	First seen when she was a lone cygnet in 2016 on a small ornamental pond at Cheltenham College. Nobody is sure how she got there. She was rescued from that unsuitable location and brought to Worcester and last seen there in early October 2021.
45N	Pen	7	DA	Ringed in Worcester as a one year old on 05/04/2015. Seen in Worcester and Bewdley. Her mate died in December 2020, and she paired up with 45T and left Worcester.
45T	Cob	5	DA	Ringed as a cygnet at Holt on 30/08/2016. One of eight cygnets Her mate died of avian flu in Dec 2020 and within 3 weeks she'd paired up with 45N.
50V	Cob	2	DA	50V is the only surviving swan from the Pitville lake brood of 2019 in Cheltenham hence they called him Solo. His parents are the famous George and Zelda of Pitville although sadly Zelda died earlier this year. The last sighting of Solo in Worcester was 08/01/2021.
63K	Pen	10	DA	Originally ringed as a one year old on 14/08/2012 Taken to Cuan Wildlife Rescue in early 2020 with her mate 26R and released in Bewdley.
63L	Pen	7	DA	Ringed as a cygnet in Bewdley 17/10/2014. Nested successfully on Northwood Lane pool since 2017. Mate was 54J and maybe still is but he has lost his ring.
67B	Pen	10	DA	Ringed as a cygnet at Mythe Pool, near Tewkesbury 30/08/2011. She has been spotted in Bewdley, Worcester, Evesham, Telford and Slimbridge.
75S	Pen	6	DA	Ringed as a one year old 22/3/2016 in Bewdley and last recorded on 14/01/2019.
76N	Pen	7	DA	Ringed in Worcester as a one year old on 10/06/2015. Disappeared for six years and reappeared in Worcester in March 2021. Probably lost mate and came back to herd. There until May 2021.
76P	Cob	6	DA	Ringed as a cygnet in Springfield Park Kidderminster 26/09/2015. Most time spent in Bewdley but also in Grimley and Worcester. In care 09/02/2019.
7JSF	Pen	2	MA	One of nine cygnets hatched on Newport Canal, Staffs, 14/09/2019. Five siblings with parents 10/02/2020. 01/03/2020 with Blue 7JSB. 04/03/2020 with parents and three siblings. 03/03/2021 Longwood Marina, Walsall. 25/03/2021 Park Lane Pits, Rushall, Walsall. On 25/05/2021 it crash landed and taken to Cuan. 10/6/21 it was released by RSPCA at Buildwas.
7JTB	Pen	2	MA	One of five cygnets hatched 5/7/2019 Tee lake, Dodhill, Telford. 1/11/2019 still present. 12/10/2020 with parents and two cygnets. 10/3/2021 With parents and one cygnet from 2020 being chased off by parents. 18/4/2021 RSPCA took it to Cuan as being bullied by Blue 7JSV. Released at Cressage 7/5/2021.
7JTH	Pen	?	MA	Montgomery Canal near Horseshoe Inn, Berriew, Welshpool rescued by RSPCA with large neck wound. Taken to Cuan. Ringed 02/09/2020 and released by RSPCA at Hampton Loade 22/09/2020.
7JVU	Juv cob	1	MA	Six eggs rescued from flood water River Severn Shrewsbury, successfully hatched at Cuan. Ringed there 8/10/2021 and released at Bobbington 12/19/2021 with 7JXE and others.
7JXE	Juv cob	1	MA	Rescued by RSPCA Norbury Junction after being bullied by adult swans, taken to Cuan. Ringed there on 8/10/2021 and released at Bobbington 12/19/2021 with 7JVU and others.
90V	Pen	4	DA	90V was ringed in Worcester as a two year old 20/11/2019. She stayed in Worcester until January 2021 when she disappeared.
BJS	Pen	5	R/J M	Ringed at Stratford on the Avon 19/11/2016, hatched that spring.
Ringers: DA - David Atkinson, MA - Martin Grant, R/J M - Ros and John Matthews				

has ringed most of these orange-ringed individuals. He tells of one pair who were such conscientious parents that in three seasons they managed somehow to adopt (or was it kidnap?) one or two small goslings which they brought up with their own cygnets. Another pair with three cygnets met another swan family and, after some altercation, swam away with seven cygnets, all of which they raised! Another pair, even though only three years old and not yet breeding themselves, adopted two goslings and raised them until adulthood, such was

their parenting instinct.

I had not realised just how mobile and changing the Bewdley swan herd is. (Yes, I learn that herd is the accepted name for a group of swans unless they are flying and then they are called a wedge.) Although numbers in late October varied between 40 and 60, by December the numbers were down to between 20 and 30 and not many of the colour-ringed individuals remained throughout the autumn (See Table 2). From

Wyre Forest Study Group

their known histories these birds have all moved around the region and been recorded at various sites, including Slimbridge, Telford, Cheltenham, Evesham, Tewkesbury, Grimley, Worcester, Stratford, Redditch. I watched BJS in Bewdley off and on during most of the autumn, but on 27th November Wyre Forest Study Group member Steve Horton photographed her on the canal in Kidderminster with her un-ringed mate. Then the following week she was back in Bewdley for at least one day before leaving again to go down to Worcester where she was seen in mid-December.

Mute Swans are certainly not mute and I learned to recognise some of the different sounds they make including grunts, hisses and the distinctive wheep-wheeping made by the cygnets. I learned that the Queen only owns the un-ringed swans (those not under the ownership of the Vintners' and Dyers' Livery Companies) on part of the River Thames where swan-upping happens whilst the birds are moulting and cannot fly. This happens in the third week of July each year between Sunbury and Abingdon bridge when the

swans are rounded up, counted, and those cygnets belonging to the Livery Companies are ringed. Cobs can be very defensive when guarding their mates on their nests or when they have cygnets, and can attack if provoked, but I could find no evidence of a swan breaking a person's leg or arm. However, an attacking swan can be very intimidating when approaching at speed with flapping wings and outstretched beak, and injury can occur if contact is made. It is always wise to keep well clear from breeding swans.

I made friends with Nick the Bewdley Birdman (Nicholas Taylor) who generously feeds the water birds every day, and cares for them. Over the last 12 years he has taken many injured swans from Bewdley to wildlife rescue centres and helps to release them back amongst their herd when they are well enough. He removes fishing line and hooks regularly and treats the wounds. One swan rescue centre refuses to release birds in Bewdley because fishing is allowed from the quayside where the swans come to feed. Nick is doing an excellent job of keeping the swans in Bewdley fit and well fed.

	Table 2. MUTE SWANS recorded from River Severn, Bewdley town SO7875. Recorder: Rosemary Winnall																				
	10R	30V	38P	41T	43U	45N	45T	50V	63K	63L	67B	75S	76N	76P	7JSF	7JTB	7JTH	7JVU	7JXE	90V	BJS
2021																					
18-Sep																		*			
25-Sep														*							
26-Sep						*	*						*	*	*		*				
27-Sep		*								*			*				*				
28-Sep				*							*						*				*
29-Sep		*					*		*				*	*	*						*
30-Sep							*		*		*				*						*
05-Oct		*					*		*		*				*						*
11-Oct							*	*					*	*	*						*
12-Oct		*			*		*			*					*					*	
16-Oct											*						*				
18-Oct			*			*	*	*							*						*
19-Oct			*						*					*						*	
21-Oct		*								*	*	*	*	*						*	
24-Oct		*	*				*	*	*			*	*		*						
26-Oct								*						*	*						
27-Oct				*								*			*						
02-Nov					*			*	*			*		*			*	*		*	*
05-Nov		*	*		*					*		*	*	*	*					*	
08-Nov									*	*			*		*			*	*	*	*
09-Nov			*		*			*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*				*	*
11-Nov	*		*					*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*
13-Nov	*		*						*					*	*	*	*	*			
17-Nov	*	*	*					*	*					*	*	*	*	*		*	
21-Nov	*	*	*					*	*	*				*	*	*	*	*			
26-Nov	*	*	*					*						*	*	*	*	*			
28-Nov		*	*							*					*		*				Can
29-Nov		Trim								NL				*							
05-Dec		*	*					*	*					*	*	Rescue					*
12-Dec						*	*	*									*				
13-Dec	*	*	*					*							*		*				
14-Dec		*	*	Wor		Wor	Wor	*		NL			Wor		*		*			Wor	Wor
18 Dec	*	*	*		*			*	*											*	
	Trim - Trimplev					NL - Northwood lane pond							Wor - Worcester								

Wyre Forest Study Group

Mute Swans usually pair for life, although if one dies the other will usually find another partner. They usually breed when about three or four years old and can be very loyal to their chosen territory. A few of the Bewdley swans are youngsters including 50V who is two years old. He was named Solo as a cygnet as he was the last surviving offspring of a pair of well-loved swans in Cheltenham. One day in 2021 I spotted him setting off by himself from Bewdley town. He saw me offering some food from the bank but declined and continued to swim quickly downstream. He was obviously a swan on a mission so I decided to follow him. But I couldn't catch up with him even though my footpath was close to the river and I walked quickly. After 1 kilometre I lost sight of him as he swam under Bewdley bypass bridge, and it took me a bit of time to climb up onto the bridge and cross the busy road to look down onto the river. From above I could see him feeding on the waterweed in the shallow riffles in the middle of the river with two other swans. I guess he knew where to come to find this palatable weed which is only accessible when the water is low.

Swans are vegetarians and need a lot of food each day, especially when the weather is cold. Mixed grain is usually offered and some of the shops in Bewdley sell it for feeding to the river birds. Swans, with their long necks, can reach down into the water to about 1 metre to retrieve it. They also take in grit to help with digestion, and this is how so many swans died of lead poisoning from swallowed fishing tackle before lead weights were banned in 1987. Mute Swans may be seen feeding in arable fields, or even on the coast

where Eelgrass is present. In Bewdley I have seen swans feeding on overhanging willow leaves and grazing *Conocephalum* liverwort from the quayside. At times they come onto the bank to eat the grass, but the presence of dogs usually deters them. Bread is apparently acceptable to feed in small amounts as long as it has no mould on it, and it can be a life-saver when the swans are particularly hungry in very cold weather. I have been able to purchase floating swan pellets from the Worcester Swan Project to feed when the river is high. The young swans take time to learn to feed from the surface but when they join the herd they soon learn from the older birds.

In mild weather on 6th December, I watched 7JSF and her mate start courtship behaviour, posturing and making some very strange sounds. 63L with mate 54J and one youngster are back on the pool in Northwood Lane. So next spring is going to be interesting. Where do all these swans nest, which ones will stay in Bewdley, and where will they be seen next? If you record any of the individuals noted in Tables 1 and 2, please send a photograph to show the ring code with date and location to me at secretary@wyreforest.net.

I would like to thank several people who have helped me learn so much during this autumn with the swans. Nick the Birdman has generously shared his enthusiasm and knowledge of the Bewdley herd. The bird ringers have put in so much time and money to ring these birds (not an easy task, I feel sure) over many years, and their dedication has helped to provide so much information about their life histories. Ros and John Matthews from South Warwickshire kindly sent me information about one of their swans and Martin Grant (Mid-Wales Ringing group) provided details about five with blue colour-rings. David Atkinson from Worcestershire was particularly generous in answering my emails about many Mute Swans that he'd ringed over many years. David has retired from ringing and unless a new ringer takes on that role, we shall not be seeing so many locally ringed birds in the future. David's Facebook page is full of fascinating information and movies of swans in Worcestershire. With the current avian 'flu present further south in the county, there is a question mark on the future of these magnificent birds on our local water bodies.

As well as watching the swans in Bewdley I watch the people who come to admire them, feed them and take their photographs. There is something special about the relationship we have with these beautiful birds and from the youngest toddler to the oldest person the experience of watching these iconic birds and relating to them is a privilege and a joy.



63L and her family, Northwood Lane Pond iced over,
29th November 2021

Rosemary Winnall