

THE NATIONAL SWAN CONVENTION

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Report on the salvage of a swans' nest inundated by the 2007 floods

Many swans' nests in the Severn catchment area were devastated in the 2007 floods. There were a few isolated reports of some salvage attempts with limited success; this one has not previously been documented. I am led to believe it may be unique.

Background

Author: Gareth Thomas, Veterinary Surgeon in Ludlow since 1968, recently retired and now Weirs Manager for the Teme Weirs Trust, with responsibility for weirs clearance, maintenance and also general welfare of the wildlife in the river corridor. In my Veterinary practice I had always taken a voluntary interest in the repair, care and rehabilitation of wildlife casualties.

History

Ludlow's River Teme was home to a pair of swans regularly in the '70's and '80's. The 90's saw them disappear, and it was Nov 2006 before a pair was seen regularly on Temeside in Ludlow town. They were seen frequently in the following months, and on 5th April, a nest was built in a Temeside resident's garden, a new site altogether. On 7th, the first egg was laid of a full clutch of 8 over the following 10 days.

My first close introduction to the birds was a 7 am phone-call from concerned residents, that the cob had landed on a town road, which was a cul-de-sac, away from the river, and he appeared to be disorientated and unable to locate the river's bearing; also unable to take off, being obstructed every way.

I attended reluctantly, and with help to round him up into a corner, caught the bird and was driven, grasping him firmly, down to the nest site on the river, where I deposited him in front of the pen, who was incubating. In a pathetic bid to minimise the ignominy of this action in front of his partner, he immediately set about all of the ducks on the river in a futile attempt to regain a modicum of respect in her eyes.

I had many dealings with this cob in the coming year, and I suspect that, far from being grateful for his relocation, he has held a grudge against me ever since for my (innocent) action. In hindsight, I should have returned him to the river just out of sight of the nest, for him to make his own majestic landfall. He has never got himself stranded on the road since.

Incubation during the following weeks was uneventful, with both adults in attendance.

On 12th/13th May we had a deluge, and more significantly, Mid-Wales (from where the Teme rises) had 4 inches of rain in a day. 14th May – another 7 am call – Help! Nest flooded, under 2 feet of water (icy); swans in a panic, with water too deep for them to reach and rescue the eggs. These were only about a week from hatching, so in a very vulnerable state.

Once again, I attended, promptly, if not gladly, and in the pouring rain, with long waders, located the nest whose eggs were all in place on the bottom of the river. I was surprised at how dense and heavy they were. I retrieved each one at a time, returning to the river's edge and handing to the waiting resident, while fending off a continuous aggressive onslaught by the now incandescent cob, who, on seeing me handling the eggs was galvanised into a frenzied attack on me which I had not expected. I had mistakenly assumed he could see that I was helping, but quite the reverse in fact, and he still managed to land some telling blows on my limbs with his wings. The bruises persisted for many weeks and remained a constant reminder of the power and mind-set of this bird. Meanwhile, the river was still rising, and the riverbank disappearing rapidly. The 8 eggs had been seriously chilled from at least two hours' submersion, and I gave little chance for the cygnets' survival, but I constructed a nest from straw, in a large plastic bread-tray and placed it, containing the eggs, about 20 feet away from the original nest-site, and about 6 feet vertically up from its original position.

By now, the rain had eased, and I was hopeful the sun would help to dry them out and warm them. I was also hopeful the pen would discover my new nest and take it over, but both parents spent the day circling the old submerged site in a distressed state, ignoring the new nest with its obvious eggs. In the afternoon, they still had not adopted them, so I phoned a wildlife rescue centre for advice on whether I should take the eggs home and incubate them for their last few days by my Rayburn. I was told in fairly curt terms I had already transgressed the law seriously by handling the eggs at all, and if I were to persist, I should run the risk of a fine of £1000 per egg handled, or possibly a custodial sentence for a whole clutch of 8.....So I was advised to leave well alone, although the eggs were being ignored.

Suffering as I was, from hypothermia myself, and nursing some very painful limbs from the swan's earlier attention, that was not really the sort of advice I had been seeking. So, at 7 pm, after a meeting, I returned to the nest site, armed with a box of foam padding, determined to risk a jail term in an attempt to salvage these cygnets. It was already dusk and starting to rain again, but on arrival at my bread crate, I was delighted and astonished to see that the pen had discovered her eggs and was happily incubating them once more – and on my artificial nest! I believe this may be unprecedented.

I returned home, relieved in more ways than one – result! Now they had to hatch.... The next morning, she was still incubating, with the cob closely on guard, but I noticed an egg about 6 feet away, down the bank. I assumed the pen had assessed the eggs' viability and had discarded this one as hopeless. (this was wrong, it was just an error, and she had not the wit to retrieve it).

At 1.30. with the cob away, and pen incubating, I retrieved the egg with a very long double-hooked pole and gently replaced it on the edge of the nest, against her breast. She immediately collected it with her bill and placed it firmly with the others, under her. The next few days saw continuous rain, and the cob undertaking active nest refurbishment, bringing much green stuff and debris to the nest, and weaving it into the straw, making a substantial structure – a proper swan's nest in fact, obliterating the bread-tray underneath.

By 21st, I had been visiting regularly, waiting for a glimpse of the eggs, but by now fearing the worst, as hatching was due, and the eggs were still intact. But on 23rd – two days late – I saw two cygnets in the morning and four later on. The morning of the 24th gave me 7 cygnets and one egg, and later on, 8 cygnets! Joy!! 25th – all cygnets swimming vigorously in the hugely flooded river, but getting perilously close to the weir's edge. Occasionally they would ride on the cob's back, but mostly were keen on swimming themselves (and very proficient even at this age).

I went to the nest-site to examine it, when the pen spotted me, swam to the river-edge, climbed out, and deliberately walked the 10 yards or so up to me, leaving the family and cob on the river. She had never shown aggression previously, though I had closely attended the nest frequently during incubation and hatching, for photography, so I was unsure what to expect. Reaching the edge of the nest, on the other side from me, she looked up at me and just uttered a soft 'quack', not a familiar swan sound, then lowering her head, quietly turned and walked back to join her family..... It was a moving moment.

26th – all family close to weir-edge and all cygnets swept over in the flood, not followed by parents. The cygnets ended up on the beach of a shingle island some way below the weir. They made mutual contact and assembled in a group of 8. Within seconds, a pair of carrion crows descended from a riverbank pine tree and took one cygnet each back to their tree nest. The adult swans, incensed by this, at last descended the weir and collected the remaining 6, taking them up the weir on their backs.

The crow (and weir) lesson was learnt abruptly and cruelly on only their second day out. This pair had not previously reared a brood; the previous year they had nested on the Birmingham - Worcester canal, but had been ousted by a more dominant territorial cob there, before that, their (first) nest attempt could succeed. From this day, all 6 cygnets survived through to Jan 2008, still staying largely as a full family. This was the year of the worst floods in living memory, and they all coped remarkably

well with this torrential river (Teme is the fastest flowing river in England/Wales). Their expertise at swimming in the swollen floods of July was truly awesome. On occasion, they would take to the flooded roads, as extra 'rivers'.

The whole family was now used to being fed by the public, and were a great attraction for the area. They spent two months, from mid-August 2007, 5 miles downstream, away from the public, during which time they flourished greatly on the copious river crowfoot and branched burr-reed which is also so abundant. In mid-October they returned to Ludlow minus one cygnet, who stayed three miles away, from choice, apparently, for they could all fly by now. The sight of the whole (**my**) family in flight is an abiding memory for me, for not only is it a very rare sight here anyway, these had a special significance for me. I attended them from time to time when mishaps occurred, like fishing line in beak etc, but mercifully, they all survived through the winter without serious mishap from fishing tackle, vandalism, shooting or poaching by our dear European cousins.....

On 17th Jan 2008, all the family flew over my house; on 18th, though, there was one cygnet missing. No body was found, but I suspected the worst. And on Feb.11th, my fears were confirmed when I found another floating downstream towards me, still warm, having just been killed. I ruled out gunshot with an X-ray, and on post mortem I discovered gross trauma to the neck. I suspected that it was a power-line strike, and soon afterwards I had confirmation that a witness had seen it hit the high-tension overhead power lines over the river near to the nest site. It dropped like a stone into the river from there, and I fully suspect the January loss was the same, but no-one was around at the time, for they frequently flew upstream at first light. In view of this, I contacted Central Networks (*e-on*) to arrange for bird diverters to be fitted to these cables to prevent further, or future losses, as I suspected our pair would breed here again this year (2008).

(After numerous hold-ups, the diverters were fitted on 10th Sept 2008, just a few days before this year's family took to the air).

In March 2008, 'my' cygnets were still with the parents, and were busy helping the cob construct a new nest on the site of the last year's (artificial) nest. I had removed the bread tray and supplied a few barrow-loads of useful garden refuse and straw nearby. They eagerly transformed this into a new nest, with all helping, except the pen. On 14th March, the nest complete, the pen took residence, as laying was imminent. The 15th March saw another massive flood, which completely swept away the new nest, although at the same height as the last year's successful one.

In a monumental effort, the family set to over the next two days, building another nest from driftwood on an island 200 yards upstream, clear of the flood, and on 19th the pen started to lay in the new nest. She laid 7 eggs over the following 11 days, during which time the cob covered them continuously, only leaving to allow the pen on briefly to lay an egg. The youngsters were finally made unwelcome by the cob and they left reluctantly for points south (Worcs?). On 31st, the clutch complete, the pen took over incubation, and on 6-7th May, hatched all into 7 cygnets.

Three of these, half white, are still with the parents (Jan 10th 2009), four having disappeared one day three months previously when they were living away from Ludlow. No clues as to what happened, though they were big enough to be capable as adults. They all now spend the night roosting on the island where they nested successfully in 2008, so it looks very much as though they have staked their claim for this year, (though there is no swan competition).

As a relevant and rewarding update, I can report (16th Oct '08) that two of **my** '07 cygnets have been back to visit their old '07 feeding/nest site on Temeside, on regular occasions, flying in from points south, but they run the risk of meeting their father and his (new) family, and although they stay to be fed, they are not allowed to dwell for long, for as soon as the cob spots them from a position well upstream, he descends with an attitude and sends them packing. They still return from time to time, in spite of him, however.

A lot of fuss, you may say, for a couple of common Mute swans, but this was a rather exceptional time and sequence of events, and swans are by no means common here; in fact these are the only pair for miles, so they deserve special attention.

It has been fascinating to watch them cope with exceptional flood conditions, both nesting and just getting about, and they have demonstrated that they are extremely capable and adaptable water birds, when many swans have only to cope with life on a lake. Also they have shown that, although not very bright, they have continuously learned from their chequered experiences of breeding in this challenging environment. It has been a privilege to have been able to help them and be directly responsible for saving the lives of just a few of these charismatic birds.

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Another fishing tragedy. By Peter (Swan Rescue South Wales)

As happens so often happens just when you're about to serve a meal or have just put the meal on the table, the phone rings and it's a problem somewhere which needs to be attended to immediately. This time, it was to Caldicot Castle in Monmouthshire only ten miles away where the pair of breeding swans had produced eight beautiful cygnets, seven of which are still 'with us' although they are beginning to take trial flights up and down the length of the lake. The pond on which they bred is a local conservation area, where fishing has not been allowed (officially) for several years. But one cygnet which was causing concern was reported to be behaving in a strange way, and it had detached itself from the rest of the family - a sure sign something was wrong. It was true he was behaving strangely; swimming was more reminiscent of the action of a dolphin. Rescue was hazardous but successful.

The bird weighed only 6.1 kg - should be nearer 8.0 kg by now. It was very obvious he had a large lump on his neck and also, again very clearly, there was a line attached somewhere behind his tongue and stretched tightly (internally) down towards the digestive organs. He was totally incapable of stretching his neck. The only course of action open to us was to transport this bird immediately to the National Swan Sanctuary at Shepperton. The immediate reaction on arrival was to summon their dedicated swan vet. He was anaesthetised and the investigation got under way. In short, the bird had a loop of fishing line around the root of his tongue; the line was as tight as a bow string and was slowly and surely severing the tongue. Can you imagine the excruciating pain being experienced by this bird? Following the operation, the bird was put on a drip, and there is reasonable hope he will recover, but once again, we have to say this simply cannot be right. We believe this bird had been suffering for many days, and but for our intervention, it is unlikely he would have survived for much longer. The cygnet's tongue was very swollen but he is recovering slowly with the help of antibiotic and pain killing injections.

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The Urine Test written by a Fireman.

I work, they pay me. I pay my taxes and the government distributes my taxes as it sees fit. In order for me to earn my monthly pay, I work on a fire station for the Fire and Rescue Service, I am required to pass a urine test for drugs and alcohol at my three yearly medical, with which I have no problem.

What I do have a problem with is the distribution of my taxes to people who don't have to pass the same urine test. Shouldn't one have to pass a urine test to get a benefits cheque because I have to pass one to earn it for them? I have no problem with helping people get back on their feet but I do on the other hand, have a problem with helping someone sit on their backside drinking beer and smoking dope all day and every day.

Can you imagine how much money the government would save if people had to pass a urine test to get a benefit cheque? Something has to change in the UK, and soon!

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Our grateful thanks to Dr Bruno Broughton for allowing the Swan Convention the use of a room at Federation House, for supplying the refreshments and for giving us a whole day of his valuable time.