

A Beauty or a Beast!!

By Bill Delorey

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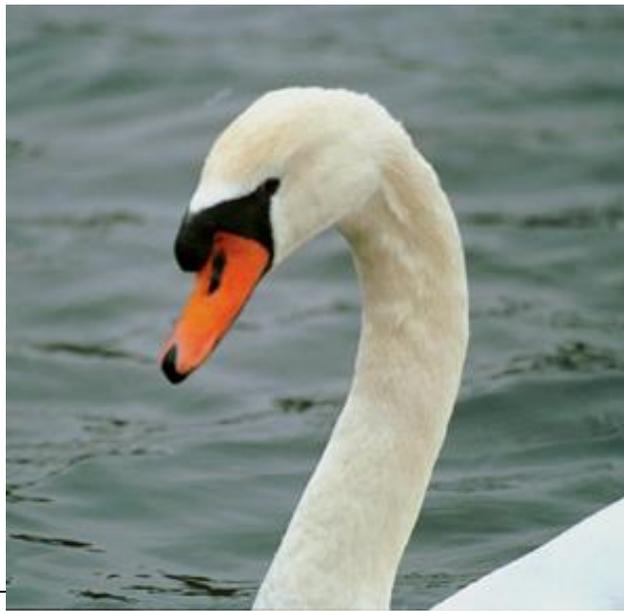
Original Publication – MassWildlife Mag

Graceful and elegant – no two words define a Mute swan quite so well. These magnificent white birds glide serenely across ponds, inlets, and marshes with neck arched and feathers preened – an exquisite portrait of natural beauty.

One regal pair raised young for years on Cedar Pond in Dennis on Cape Cod, and another claimed Bound Brook, each pair defending its territory aggressively. Bobbing beneath the surface and feeding on the bottom, occasionally snatching a sprig or stem along the shoreline, each bird consumes eight to ten pounds of food a day. Primarily vegetarians and the largest of the duck family, these beauties simply float around the ponds – a vision of tranquility.



Don't let that serenity fool you. Extremely protective of their homes and young, swans defend cygnets and the family turf aggressively with sharp beaks and powerful wing slaps. Male mute swans in particular often kill waterfowl and other birds to protect their territory, and numerous attacks on swimmers, hikers, dogs and even boaters have been documented.



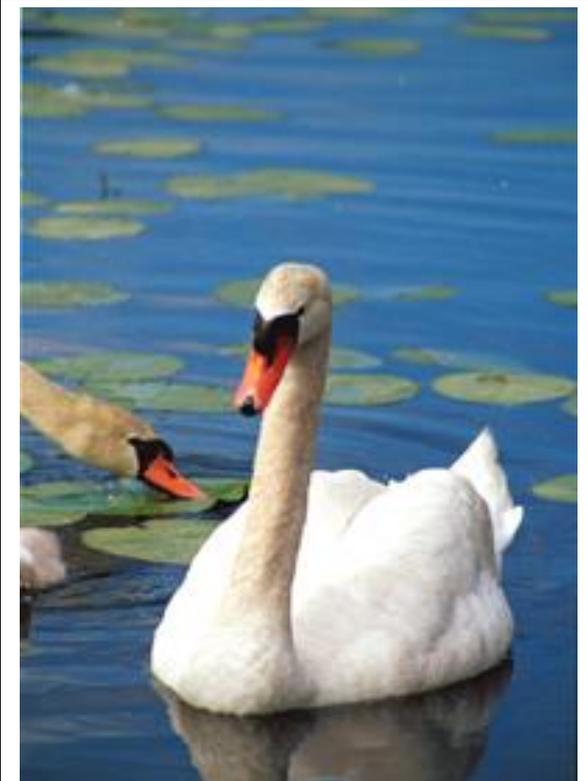
Biologists now consider the Mute swan a North American domestic species, but those found on Cape Cod were originally native to Europe and Asia. Several pair brought to New York as estate pets in 1919 escaped, and from there, the prolific birds spread throughout New England, Connecticut, Virginia and several mid-west states.

Swans have tremendous endurance and can easily travel a great distance at over forty miles an hour. Although many migrate in the late fall, they remain primarily in the northeast and simply move around to escape the freezing waters.

A successful and prolific transplant, Mute swans are expanding the nesting range inland from the east coast. Swans are the largest of the duck family and separate into seven species. Observers identify the Mutes by the pure white plumage, fluffy back feathers, black legs and feet, and a black knob at the base of the bill. Both sexes look similar, but the females are slightly smaller and have a smaller knob.

When fully grown, swans are five feet from beak to tail, with a wingspan of six-feet, or more. Unlike other species of swan, which often are extremely vocal, adult mutes only growl and cough, hence the common name.

Mute swans differ slightly from other varieties, exhibiting an arched neck and an orange beak with a black knob at the crown of the jaw. Cygnets hatch in early spring, covered with gray-brown fluffy feathers that turn pure white as the young mature – cygnets normally have gray feathers and beaks. With age, the beak turns orange and develops a black knob at its base.





Occasionally a youngster exhibits white feathers during first growth. The white feathers create difficulty even with siblings as the white color triggers territorial behavior and the young often receive aggressive or defensive behaviors from siblings and even parents.

Swans mate for life, live about 35 years, and raise young every spring from a clutch of four to eight eggs. Not easily frightened, swans have few predators in North America, and those few, snapping turtles and coyotes among them, are successful only with eggs and the young. An adult mute easily defends itself against either enemy.

Swans have become so successful over the years that many states are considering regulatory laws, and even a hunting season. But the battle rages, one side says leave nature alone, swans merely fertilize and prune – the other side claims swans pollute the environment, strip the vegetation, and damage the ecosystem.

Whatever the results of that battle, locals and visitors alike find an enjoyable sight in these graceful and elegant waterfowl that inhabit New England shores year round.



