

NO SWAN SONG FOR THE MUTES... FOR NOW

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ALL PHOTOS BY SUE MILLER

Of the many bird species that captivate and delight the human imagination, one of the most beloved is surely the swan. Stately and graceful, imposing in size, and monogamous by nature, these regal birds enchant us as they glide serenely on lakes and ponds in the five continents wherein they reside.

As majestic as they look when swimming, their appearance in flight is also impressive, necks outstretched and broad wings beating slowly. When migrating, they fly in a V-formation or diagonally, and very high. Though somewhat ungainly on land, they are the fastest of waterfowl both on water and in the air.

Swans eat a variety of aquatic plants. They will also eat tadpoles, insects, and small mollusks, depending on what is available where they live. Males and females – respectively called cobs and pens – look alike. Sociable except during the breeding season, they mate for life, like many birds. Similar to their closest relatives, geese, the male stands guard nearby when the female is on the nest. In some swan species, the cob helps with the brooding. Their cygnets have a short neck at first, and are able to run and swim within a few hours after hatching. However, they are carefully watched over by their parents for several months, some cygnets even riding on their mother's back. They mature fully in three to four years and can live as long as 20 years in the wild.

Internationally, swans have long been symbols of love and beauty. They were sacred birds to Venus, Roman Goddess of Love. In the ancient Greek tradition, they were also sacred to the god Apollo and associated with music. To the Celts, they were symbolic of the soul. To many Native Americans the swan totem represents grace and the rhythm of the universe. Swans were often featured prominently in fairy tales, such as Hans Christian Anderson's *The Wild Swans*, and his much-loved allegory, *The Ugly Duckling*. The composer Saint-Saens immortalized them in his evocative piece, *The Swan*, and of course, there is the perennially popular and poignant ballet, *Swan Lake*.

In spite of these charming allusions, and even though swans appear to be admired almost universally, thousands of swans are being killed in states across the country, with the executioners using specious, unscientific arguments; and sometimes at the behest of people who have purchased lakeside property and simply don't like having to share the waterfront with wildlife. The cruelty inherent in swan elimination is appalling. Just as with the frequent Wildlife Services attacks on Canada geese, swans are rounded up brutally, squashed into crates, and taken to facilities to be gassed to death. Frequently, their delicate necks are wrung on the spot. Shooting is another method of killing. Reports from witnesses in Michigan say that killings are often at night, using silenced guns, wounding the swans in the body and then clubbing them to death. It is beyond barbaric to treat these sentient beings like this, yet it goes on, unabated, because most of the public is not aware of it or does not know what to do.

Near-Extinction History

The largest swan, with a wingspan that can extend ten feet, Trumpeter Swans were nearly made extinct in the U.S. By 1935, less than one hundred were left alive. Before European settlement, the Trumpeters were found across the continent. But from Colonial days onward, they were hunted for their commercial value, as well as for "sport," and their wetlands habitat was destroyed by "development." By the beginning of the last century they were barely clinging to survival in the relative safety of Yellowstone. When the Migratory Bird Treaty Act passed



in 1918, they received official protection outside of the park, as well.

Another refuge was established in 1935 in Red Rocks Park, farther west, where they were fed grain during the winter months. In these havens, their numbers increased, and from there, they were reintroduced to the rest of the country.

Three swan species currently live in New York State. The Trumpeter Swan and the Tundra Swan are generally considered native to North America. The Mute Swan is thought to have been introduced to the U.S. from Europe, and certainly some Mutes were brought here in the 19th century; but there is evidence that there were Mute Swans living in Virginia in the 16th Century, so the matter of their heritage is a moot point.

The Mute Swans' ancestry has in recent years become a matter of great import – indeed, of life and death. The common belief that they are a “non-native, invasive” species has been used as part of a rationale by wildlife management agencies in several states to decimate or even entirely wipe out their mute swans. Maryland, Michigan, and New York are among the states that have declared war on the mutes, alleging the species is a nuisance, harmful to the environment and other species.

Departments of Natural Resources, and, in NYS, the Department of Environmental Conservation, predicate their case for mass slaughter on the assertion that mutes are not native American swans. Even if we discount the fact that a painting was made of what appears to be a Mute Swan in 1585 by John White, who accompanied settlers to the Roanoke Colony in Virginia, i.e., even *if* the Mutes are not native, there can be no disputing that they are naturalized. Therefore, Wildlife Watch believes they deserve the same protection as naturalized human citizens.

The DNRs and DEC claim that they eat too much vegetation, crowding out other waterfowl. Yet observations by seasoned wildlife watchers indicate no serious threat from Mutes. They have been seen co-habiting peacefully with ducks and geese. All birds are territorial to some extent, but the Mutes are no more aggressive than native swans.

A third excuse offered by the wildlife agencies is that Mutes pollute the waters they use. This argument is so spurious as to be laughable. Nothing that comes from a Mute Swan is worse than what comes from geese and ducks. And swan “pollution” is completely benign compared to the toxic chemical muck that humans ruin our waterways with, everything from motor oil leaking from boats to life-destroying fertilizer runoff from farms.

Contrary to what wildlife management would have the public believe, Mute Swans, like other species, are a useful part of the ecosystems where they live. Their consumption of vegetation helps humans who wish to use the waterways for their own recreation by removing aquatic plants in congested areas.

The NYS DEC, in their proposal to eradicate all Mute Swans from the state, further claims the bird is dangerously aggressive. Any waterfowl whose nest is threatened may charge at a trespassing human, but the worst damage a Mute Swan might inflict is a bruise if they manage to connect with the interloper. Swans are far more fragile and vulnerable than the average human being, so it is absurd to see them as a serious threat.

A tentative reprieve may be in the offing for NYS Mute Swans, but it is far from certain: When the swan killing proposal was publicized early this year, enough people expressed their outrage at the imminent mass slaughter of a beloved icon that the DEC says they will “revise” their plan. The DEC is well known for brutally mismanaging many animal populations, resulting in the deaths of countless individuals, so we cannot take for granted that they will not continue to persecute the Mute Swans, if not by outright killing, then by other cruel measures, such as setting dogs on swans.



If we are to protect the lives of these innocent birds, we must regularly inform our elected officials that we are strongly against any “management” that involves harm to them; and urge legislatures of any state that kills swans to pass laws forbidding their wildlife agencies to carry out such plans.

If you are a NYS resident, we urge you to support Senator Tony Avella’s bill S6589.

Please go to the following petition site; Click on the photo.