

Thorndon Birdlife October 2022

I was travelling back into Thorndon on the Thwaite Road last week and flushed a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) from the verge, it crossed over the road and flew parallel to the road about 1m above the ground into Thorndon and as far as I know, not to be seen again. It is the UK's smallest bird of prey and the flight silhouette is not unlike a Peregrine falcon. This tiny bird makes up for its lack of size with sheer determination and lack of fear, it is a specialist in catching birds and was known for catching larks. It is definitely a bird that lives up to the 'dashing' falcon label. Lifespan age in the wild is three years. Adults have a 62% year-to-year survival. First year survival is 23% and the oldest known wild bird was almost 13 years old (data taken from a BTO ringing recovery)

I saw quite a few mute swans (*cygnus olor*) at the weekend on the Town Marshes, Southwold. It's not strictly true that 'the Crown owns all the swans' in Britain. Technically, the Crown does own all unmarked mute swans in open water but only exercise ownership rights on some stretches of the Thames and its tributaries. The old tale that a swan can break your arm is more myth than fact. But it's true, they might be aggressive in the breeding season and try to see you off.

The wild populations are found all over Europe and Asia and the far north of Africa as a rare winter visitor. It is an introduced species in North America, home to the largest populations outside of its native range, with additional smaller introductions in Australasia and southern Africa. The name 'mute' derives from it being less vocal in flight than other swan species. Where humans use the waterways, they regularly approach people anticipating treats, they are very much a part of British culture. In 2015, the mute swan was moved from the British Green list to its Amber list as the UK now holds 20-30% of the wintering European population, making it of international importance. This large swan is wholly white in plumage with an orange beak bordered with black. It is recognizable by its pronounced knob atop the beak, which is larger in males.

Mute swans usually take 3 years to mature. They breed in March to mid-May when the male (cob) starts the nest building, enticing the female (pen) to pick the right location. They both build up the mounds with whatever materials are available. If they are successful parents, they will use the same nest site for many years, adding more and more to the nest. A cob will become very territorial and will not tolerate other swans on his patch and surrounding area during the breeding season. They make excellent parents, defending their young from all predators. Both parents are devoted to the cygnets and those familiar with the fairy-tale "The Ugly Duckling" by Hans Christian Andersen may remember how the ugly duckling in the story was actually a baby swan and not a duckling at all! Baby swans, or cygnets, hatch covered in a thick down. They're able to run and swim after just hours, but their parents remain very protective over them in the early months of their life. A cygnet actually absorbs a lot of their egg's yolk in their hatching process which contains plenty of strongly concentrated macro and micronutrients. As a result, cygnets likely won't feed for around a week after hatching. The quantity of yolk they absorb from the egg dramatically affects chance of surviving this precarious early period. After around a week, the baby swans will instinctively feed themselves, they'll sift through water in search of microscopic organisms and bite soft aquatic foliage like duckweed.

Swans in the wild tend to live for around 9 to 12 years on average, but there are many examples of them living into their late 20s and early 30s. Swans face many risks during their

first few months alive, and as many as 50% of all cygnets die within three months of hatching

Sightings; Merlin. 3 x Buzzards, Song thrush, Mistle thrush, Green & Great-spotted woodpeckers, Jays, Goldcrests, Marsh and Coal tits. Tawny owls at night.

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