



Thorndon Birdlife

November 2023

The Whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*), also known as the Common swan, is a familiar winter visitor across much of Britain and Ireland with the majority arriving late September, though it is less commonly encountered in the more southern counties. The species name is from *cygnus*, the Latin for “swan”. Every winter thousands of Whooper swans from Iceland and Bewick’s swans from Arctic Russia migrate into UK and Ireland to spend the winter here. Telling these two black and yellow-billed swans apart can be tricky.



Bewick's

The Whooper has a more angular head shape and a more variable bill pattern that always shows more yellow than black, the Bewick's swans have more black than yellow. Like their close relatives, Whooper swans are vocal birds with a call similar to the Trumpeter swan.



Bewick's swan

Whooper swan

The Whooper is a large swan, with a triangular yellow bill patch, and a straight-necked look, and have a more northerly wintering distribution within Britain & Ireland than its smaller relative the Bewick swan. An increase in the Icelandic breeding population, about 30%, is thought to be behind the increasing numbers reported by the Wetland Bird Survey and evident in latest Atlas results. There are few records of Whooper swans breeding in the UK, although Bird Atlas 2007–11 recorded successful breeding in south-east England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Whilst some birds probably originate from captive stock, the Shetland breeding records indicate an expansion of the arctic population.



Whooper

Whooper swans require large areas of water to live in, especially when they are still growing because their body weight cannot be supported by their legs for extended periods. It spends much of its time swimming, straining the water for food, or eating plants that grow on the bottom. They also pair for life, and their cygnets stay with them all winter; they are sometimes joined by offspring from previous years.

Their preferred breeding habitat is wetland, but semi-domesticated birds will build a nest anywhere close to water. Both the male and female help build the nest, and the male will stand guard over the nest while the female incubates. The female will usually lay 4–7 eggs (exceptionally 12).

The cygnets hatch after about 36 days and have a grey or brown plumage. The cygnets can fly at an age of 120 to 150 days. When they prepare to go on a flight as a flock, they use a variety of signalling movements to communicate with each other. These movements include head bobs, head shakes, and wing flaps and influence whether the flock will take flight and if so, which individual will take the lead. Whooper swans that signalled with these movements in large groups were found to be able to convince their flock to follow them. In comparison, swans that did not signal were only able to create a following. In most cases, the Whooper swan in the flock that makes the most movements (head bobs) are also the swan that initiates the flight of the flock – this initiator swan can be either male or female.

Swans will go through a mourning process, and in the case of the loss of their mate, may either stay where he or she lived, or fly off to join a flock. Should one of the pair die while there are cygnets present, the remaining parent will take up their partner's duties in raising the clutch.

The Whooper swan is the National Bird of Finland, it was considered the holiest of all water birds, and was thought to bring death to others if killed. It was also believed that the swan's long, straight neck allowed it to view the land of the dead, called Tuonela in Finnish mythology.

Now is a good time to clean your bird feeders ready for winter, high energy food is always a preference, porridge oats are also good for birds for many of the same reasons they are good for humans. They are full of slow-release carbohydrates, which help keep up energy and keep birds warm, especially in winter.

Garden sightings this month: Redpolls, Red kite

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