

Polish Swans

Amongst the more familiar birds we meet in Kent, the Mute Swan seems to have few enthusiastic followers amongst birders. They are fairly common and seem rather dull by comparison with their wild counterparts, Bewicks and Mute Swans. But if we take the time to look carefully at them in the breeding season we may find that all is not as it appears with this well-known species..



Mute swan family with two 'Polish'cygnets, Grove ferry, 2013 photo by Martyn Wilson

In recent years I have encountered pairs of swans at Grove Ferry and Oare Marshes who produce some offspring with white, rather than grey down.

There is a colour form of the Mute Swan in which the cygnets hatch from the egg covered in a pure white down, instead of the usual grey. These young birds have the normal succession of moults, but all their juvenile plumages are white, not brown. In addition to the white plumage, they have pale, slightly pinkish legs, by which birds of this colour variety can be recognised throughout their lives.



Polish cygnet, Grove ferry, by Martyn Wilson

Nowadays, this form is usually referred to as the 'Polish Swan'. The name seems to have been given to it by London poulterers who imported birds from the Baltic. These swans are commoner in Eastern Europe than they are in the west; the name 'Polish' is, however, something of a misnomer, since the form is no commoner in Poland than in several other areas of Eastern Europe. In some parts of Eastern Europe it may make up about 20 per cent of the population, whereas in Britain it is exceedingly rare. The genetic basis of the two colour forms has been resolved and shows that the Polish gene is recessive to the grey form, which means an individual has to inherit both 'Polish' genes to be born with white down.

Although the first British specimens of this form were recorded from Staffordshire in 1686. It was William Yarrell who named the birds as a separate species *Cygnus immutabilis* (= unchanging), in recognition of the fact that their plumage remained white throughout their lives. There is a Kent connection in this story, as Yarrell presented a specimen to a meeting of the Zoological Society in London which had been shot from a flock of 30 on the Medway near Snodland Church by the Reverend L.B.Larking of Ryarsh Vicarage in 1838.

Although we now recognise this as a genetic aberration, there is an intriguing comment in Yarrell's book 'A History of British Birds, vol 3; about the anatomy of the skull structure carried out which describes a whole series of significant structural differences when compared to normal Mute Swans. There is no indication of how many birds were examined and the bird in question may have been atypical, but it does make one think!!

Birkhead, M. & Perrins, C (1986) *The Mute Swan* Croom Helm
Ticehurst, N.F. (1957) *The Mute Swan in England* Cleaver Hume
Yarrell, W (1843) *A History of British Birds, Vol III* Van Voorst

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