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Swan Lifeline Newsletter

Issue 67

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Spring/Summer 2011

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Editorial	1
Forthcoming events/fundraising	1
Cuckoo Weir news	1
A visit to Swan Lifeline - Barclay McIntosh	2
A great success story - Bob Lang	2
A stick (or swan) in the mud - Joanne De Nobriga	3
An oil spill - Wendy	3
Directory	4
Membership Rates	4

Editorial

As postage has gone up yet again I would mention that it does help us greatly if we can e-mail the newsletter to you. The document and any enclosures are PDFs so that hopefully it does not get blocked. In addition I e-mail to myself as elizabethkwebb@btinternet.com with the recipients as BCC so that your e-mail address is not divulged to a lot of other people. I have to confess that owing to my limited knowledge of computers I may have 'lost' some amendments to the database by not backing up the system properly so I apologise to any of you who have given me their change of details and I appear to have ignored them. I think (!) I have solved the problem for the future.

The winter brought lots of reports of swans stuck in snow and ice and it naturally proved very difficult for our rescuers to move about. There was a problem with a disease affecting mature birds out in the flocks between January and March. We worked with the Veterinary Laboratories Agency in Winchester and other organisations to identify the disease. It transpired that clostridium bacteria (always present) in the birds was activated by the intake of too much carbohydrate as the severe cold weather prevented the swans from accessing the weed which is the mainstay of their diet. It was extremely distressing for all our volunteers and for Wendy in particular.

We will not know the full effect of the losses until after Swan Upping. The pen of the pair that usually nests on the end of Cuckoo Weir Island died, however, 'Kong' has been seen with a new lady friend but he has not bred this year. Although swans do go through a period of mourning when they lose a mate the instinct to breed kicks in if they have a nest site that they can

protect. In recent years the shortage of nest sites has meant that the 'singletons' in the flocks often do not breed for some years after maturity as the competition is too great.

As always we look forward to the spring and the hope of new nest sites and in due course cygnets; and also to some extent to the start of the closed fishing season. Whilst we are privileged to have several fishing clubs among our members and very much appreciate their support some of the unregulated anglers can cause problems for us.

Forthcoming events/fundraising

Midsummer Fayre, Windsor	25 th June
Swan Upping Trip	20 th July
Open Day	4 th September
Eton College Charity Fair	24 th September

We still have some tickets available for Swan Upping - contact Kay if you wish to join us. Unfortunately, we were unable to get enough support to make trips to either Abbotsbury or Slimbridge viable propositions.

We were delighted to welcome a visit from the **Worshipful Company of Dyers** who have supported us for many years. Once again we received a contribution from **Hurley Regatta** and as always appreciate the continued support of the village; also that of **The Old Mill at Aldermaston**. **Waitrose** in Newbury & Windsor have included us in their Community Matters Programme, so if you are a Waitrose Shopper do watch out for us or even suggest that your local store features us. **Kay**

Cuckoo Weir news

Those of you who have been to Cuckoo Weir will appreciate that we are rather tucked out of the way. Unfortunately we had a break-in at the centre and the engine for the inflatable boat was stolen - so security has been stepped up.

After the very cold winter the warm dry spring meant we were fortunately able to release many of the swan patients back to the wild even more promptly than usual. These included the cygnets that were too vulnerable to be released in the autumn. This had the added advantage of giving us the opportunity to

continue with the replacement of the pens and they are progressing fantastically well.

As you know we are not, as such, open to the public and only ask for a prior notification of a visit if possible to ensure that someone can give some time to a visitor rather than leave them to their own devices whilst the volunteers get on with the day's work. The requirements for public opening are too numerous and expensive to make it a viable proposition - a zoo licence would also be required! One visitor in March wrote as follows:-

A visit to Swan Lifeline

I've been a member of Swan Lifeline for about 8 years, but living in the central belt of Scotland meant that I couldn't make any practical contribution to the great work that goes on in Windsor. However, during a recent trip to London I was able to spend a morning with the team at Cuckoo Weir Island and met quite a number of fellow members and volunteers. Wendy and Kay introduced me to the centre's only resident swan Busta. He's unable to fly, but makes his presence known by doing a lot of flapping of wings! I was particularly amused by his identification ring: **HRH**.

I wasn't the only visitor that morning as a team had arrived from ITV to film an item for that evening's news about the number of swans on the Thames that had been dying due to a toxin being produced in their digestive systems. The death toll had reached 150.

Wendy invited me to hold a swan to have my photo taken, which I was delighted to do. It was not nearly as heavy as its bulk had suggested and seemed to be quite content at being held.

Kay took me on a tour of the facility and explained about the diversity of work that is carried out. I was particularly impressed with the medical area, which enables an extensive range of veterinary procedures to be undertaken. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit and hope to return in the future to see more of the great work that goes on.

Barclay McIntosh

A great success story

In April 2009 we had a call from an angler that he had spotted a swan with an injured wing, in a stream leading from a fishing lake near Colnbrook. I went to take a look, met the angler, and got directions to where the swan was. It did indeed have what looked like a serious wing injury. The stream was in a steeply banked ditch, and the few areas that looked approachable were in fact fairly deep silt. No way was the bird coming anywhere near me, so a team effort was required.

The team consisted of **Wendy, Steve** and **me**, Steve in a canoe to block escapes, and Wendy and me on either side of the bank. After a long, drawn-out chase, Steve made it get out of the water and into some reeds, where it was caught between Steve in the water and me approaching through the 'soft' reeds. We managed to restrain, secure and bag the bird, which by now was spooked, exhausted and hurting.

On examination at Cuckoo Weir, it became obvious that the swan indeed had a broken left wing. Standard procedure in these cases is to strap it, stabilise the bird, particularly with regard to shock, then take it to the vets where the wing would be amputated. Such birds tend to be with us for a long term, while waiting for secure, tended lakes to be found for them, given that they are now flightless.

Paul, our vet, took the X-rays, and these showed two breaks, about 2 inches apart on the same bone. This was a strong pointer to someone taking a piece of wood, about the thickness of a baseball bat, and hitting the swan hard. It also explained why it just wanted to keep away from its human rescuers. The breaks were, however, quite clean, and Paul suggested that we try to save the wing. He uses a 'fixator', something like an external pin, to hold animal bones in place while they heal. The swan had nothing to lose, so it was agreed to give it a go.

The operation went well. A month on, the fixator was still in place, and X-rays showed the breaks were indeed mending. In June Paul removed the fixator, and the swan was allowed on water, for the first time in two months. In late July 2009 we released the swan to the flock at Windsor, and added a Darvic ring, **U2P***, for easy identification if needed in the future. We were still mindful that this wing would need to be strong enough to lift a 10 kilo bird out of water and support it in flight.

U2P disappeared in to the flock, and, after a while, out of mind. Other birds and other crises took our attention as is the norm in the work at Swan Lifeline. As far as U2P was concerned, no news was good news.

No news was indeed good news for the best part of two years. In early March I got a call to see if we could rescue a swan found on a residential road in Colnbrook, not far from the river. It sounded either like it had been chased off by other birds, or had landed in the road by mistake. Some people had walked the bird off the road and into a shed, where it was a simple job to secure it. On examination there seemed to be nothing wrong with the swan. It was in good condition, good weight, no problems with walking, wings seemed fine, and there were not even any abrasions from a landing in the road as opposed to water. There was no reason not to release this swan to a safe flock, so I took it to Windsor and did exactly that. As a matter of routine I took note of the identification. The swan had a metal BTO ring, plus a Darvic ring, U2P, which at that time meant nothing to me, two years on.

It was only after the event, when Wendy and I were checking the computer to see if the bird had 'previous form' with Swan Lifeline, that we found that this bird was indeed our broken wing swan of two years ago. Having released it to Windsor and rescued it in Colnbrook, we couldn't get better proof that Paul's work had been a complete success. It's a long walk from Windsor to Colnbrook, especially if you're a swan! Paul was delighted when Wendy told him; it's nice to have concrete proof of success, even more so when the patient is a wild bird. We were pretty chuffed too!

Confirmation of this success means that should the opportunity arise, birds with similar breaks can be given a second chance to lead a normal, flighted life. "Cheers U2P, keep on flying!"

Bob Lang

* Whilst we do not put Darvic rings on all birds released they are all issued with a BTO ring. The information is sent to Oxford University and stored on their database. It is also, of course on our database at Cuckoo Weir so we are always readily able to access information on the medical and other history of a bird that has been in care.

A stick (or swan) in the mud

The call comes in late afternoon just as I am getting ready to go out to dinner. Fortunately my friend is used to me ringing up to cancel or otherwise delay our dates so I ring and tell him that "plan b" is now in operation, whatever "plan b" might be.

A call has come in via the RSPCA that a swan is stuck in the mud on the Kennet and Avon canal. It is likely that nothing is wrong, but as with all calls, we always respond. Better to check something out rather than risk a swan suffering.

I jump in the car and drive through the traffic. I'm a bit stressed and turn up at the wrong location, but quickly check my map and realise I need to be right in the middle of town. Working my way through the one way system I finally get to the right spot and park the car. According to the reports, the swan was seen in the mud right at the bottom of the road. I look over the railings and scan the water. There is no sign of a swan anywhere and no sign of mud at all. I'm a little confused, but perseverance is the name of the game. Looking around I see a storm drain that sweeps down from the houses behind me and into the river. It has been recently cleaned out and is looking pristine but happily also muddy – that must be where my swan is. I walk over the bridge and look along the drain, but there is not a single flash of white. I'm puzzled and begin to think the call was misplaced. But something calls me to check more closely and I walk a little further along the path and look back towards the bridge. I notice there are railings under the non-water side of the bridge, and jammed up against the railings is a swan. The yearling is barely recognisable as a swan, covered in dark mud. In fact it looks dead and I wonder how I can get to it. Never one to give up I trek back to the car, put my wellies on, grab my gear and scramble down the bank.

Imagine my surprise when, as I approach, an eyelid slowly opens and I realise the swan is alive. Immediately I get to work, wondering how I might rescue it. The problem is that the railings preclude any attempt to catch it from that side of the bridge. I'll have to take a risk and go in from the water's edge side and crawl under the bridge. It's a bit scary because I don't know what the ground is like and have no desire to get sucked into deep mud. There's a homeless man sitting quietly on the bridge and I ask him if he will keep an

eye open for me and make sure I come back out again. He nods and I climb down the other bank and gingerly place my feet in the water. Fortunately the ground is stony so I feel a little more comfortable. I decide to take only a tie in with me, the hook will be pointless and I won't have room to wrap the swan and place it in a bag. Bending double I duck under the bridge and wade towards the swan. It's so low, that my bum is in the water but I persevere and make it to the swan which looks somewhat surprised to see me but is far too exhausted to complain.

Quickly I tie its legs and turn around, bumping my head on the metal bridge above me. There's barely any room to manoeuvre or even pick up the swan so I have to drag it carefully through the mud until I can float it in the water. By the time I make it out into the river, there's a lovely man who has somehow seen me and takes the swan from me whilst I scramble up the bank. I then wrap the swan, place it in the bag and take it to the car, thanking the homeless man and the passerby. The swan is absolutely exhausted and its head is swollen from being beaten by the wings of the adult that chased it into the mud. As soon as I place it in the car, it sinks its head down and goes straight to sleep. I make it safely to SLL where Wendy places the swan in a pen by itself with a heat lamp. There's no point washing it today for it is already stressed and its most urgent need is to rest and to get warm again.

What amazes me about this rescue is that anyone saw the swan in the first place. Someone must have either been looking over the bridge, and leaning out quite a bit, or perhaps someone, from one of the houses that back on to the storm drain, looked out through a window, espied the swan and recognised it as a swan that was in distress. All I can say is thank you to whoever was vigilant enough and saved the life of a yearling.

Joanne de Nobriga

An oil spill

In April a girl waded into the River Wye in Kingsmead to try and save a group of ducklings after there was an oil leak which killed the female duck. We had been called by the **RSPCA**, but this was just the beginning of a rescue operation. We were forced to abandon the rescue on the Sunday evening when it got too dark and might have put our volunteers at risk. On the Monday, St. Tiggywinkles also arrived and we all worked together to rescue from the river, swans and ducks that were covered in oil. As the river is quite shallow, **Steve's** skill in a canoe was again required as the motorised boats were of little use. The swans, a breeding pair, were taken back to Cuckoo Weir and bathed in Fairy Liquid. As the nest was already built we had an anxious wait of several days whilst the swans regained full waterproofing and recovered from the oil that they had ingested before we were able to clean them. The Environment Agency finally gave us the 'all clear' to release the swans although we understand that charges will be brought against the perpetrators.

Wendy

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Membership Rates for 12 months

Individual: £ 10.00 Family: £15.00 Under 16s & seniors: £ 8.00 Groups: £25.00

Please make cheques or postal orders payable to 'Swan Lifeline' and send to Kay Webb.

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This declaration covers all donations I have made since 6 April 2000 and all donations I make hereafter.

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Please remember to notify Swan Lifeline if you no longer pay an amount of income tax or capital gains tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your donation (from 6 April 2011, 25 pence for every pound you give).

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Please return completed Banker's Order to: **Ms Frances Overman, 3 Derwent Close, Feltham Middlesex TW14 9QL**



'A view of the new pens.'