

Lothians and Fife Swan and Goose Study Group

Founded in 1978

Information Leaflet - Swans



Tayport Harbour



Craiglockhart Pond

August 2012

Introduction

The Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* is found across the Palearctic in an area extending from North and central Europe to central Asia with a population of over 500,000 birds. It is regarded as native in Britain where the population numbers around 74,000 birds. Mute Swans have been introduced to many countries throughout the world. The European population has increased and expanded in its range since the 1970s.

History

Mute Swans were present in Britain and widespread in England prior to 1250. They were highly valued as a source of food, down and feathers and consequently during the mediaeval period the population was reduced to a semi-captive state in Britain and it is only in the last hundred years or so that the British population has returned to the wild state. The species has never been a “royal” bird in Scotland. The Scots Parliament passed an Act in 1551 to fix the price of swans at five shillings each. There are records of breeding at Kilconquhar Loch, Fife, in 1629, of their presence on Linlithgow Loch around 1650 and of an introduction to Duddingston Loch in 1678. A national census in 2002 recorded the highest ever total of Mute Swans in Scotland - 7028 birds, including 1012 breeding pairs - representing 22% of the British population.



Tayport shore

Reasons for the study

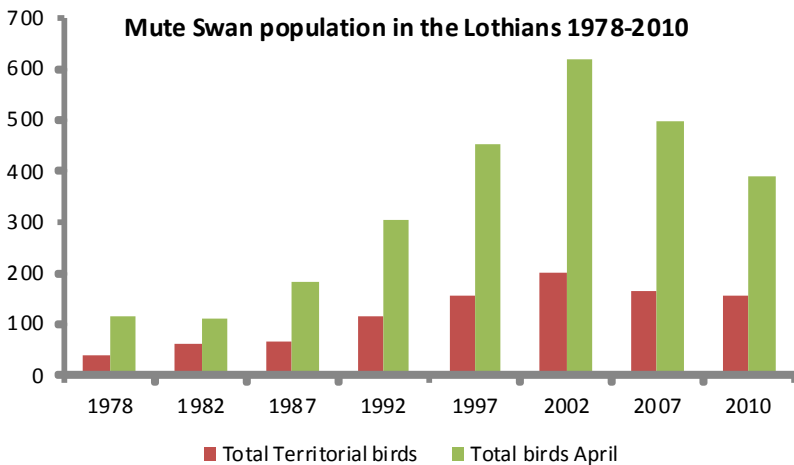
Concerns were expressed by ornithologists in the Lothians in 1976 regarding an apparent decline in the number of Mute Swans in the area and the population was surveyed in 1977. Annual censuses have been carried out since 1978 and the study was extended to Fife in 1991. In addition the scope of the study was broadened in 1981 to encompass all aspects of the breeding cycle from nesting to the number of young fledged and to record flock numbers at key sites throughout the year.

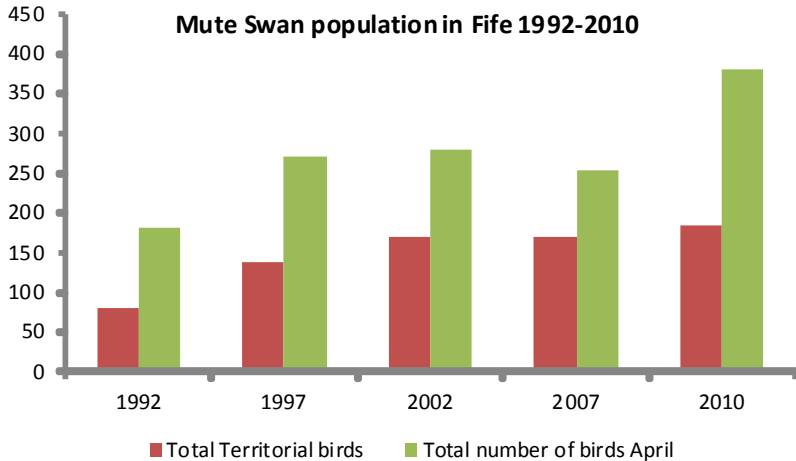
Ringling

The commencement of a colour ringing scheme in 1982 enabled aspects of population dynamics such as post-fledging survival, mortality and movements to be examined. The ringing is undertaken by qualified ringers licensed through the British Trust for Ornithology. Each swan is fitted with a uniquely numbered metal ring and a larger coloured plastic ring which enables individual swans to be identified without the need for recapture. Prior to 1994 white rings with three numbers or letters were used but since 1995 pale green rings with three black letters have been utilised and more recently dark green rings with three white letters. Over 5,000 birds, including 3,000 cygnets, have been ringed since 1982.

Population trend

In the Lothians the territorial population increased from only 20 pairs in 1978 to around 100 pairs between 2002 to 2006 but has since declined to 78 pairs in 2010. During the same period the total population increased from 117 birds in 1978 to a peak of 619 in 2005 before declining to 391 birds in 2010. In Fife the territorial population of 40 pairs in 1992 had increased to 92 pairs in 2010 with the total population increasing from 181 to 381 birds over the same period.





Some findings from ringing

1. Many established pairs remain at their breeding site even if unsuccessful.
2. A number of pairs have remained together for over 10 years.
3. One third of cygnets do not survive their first year and only a third of these attain breeding age (at 3-4 years) and only a small percentage of these actually breed.
4. Most fledged cygnets join local flocks but a few move considerable distances with birds seen as far north as Aberdeenshire, south into Durham and North Yorkshire and west as far as Ayrshire.
5. Most birds do not live beyond 12 years of age but a small number have lived to 20 years old.
6. Over 100 territorial sites have been occupied in both Lothians and Fife but not all are used every year.

Additional Assistance

Many people have contributed to this project but additional help or details of ringed swan sightings are always welcome. The cooperation of landowners, local authorities and national agencies has been invaluable and much appreciated.

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