

Whooper Swan

Cygnus cygnus

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Aves
Order Anseriformes
Family Anatidae



Native to: Northern hemisphere.

Status: Least Concern

The Whooper Swan still has a relatively good population worldwide but is slightly threatened by habitat degradation and loss especially in the Asian part of its breeding range. Threats to its habitats include agricultural expansion, wetland drainage for irrigation, overgrazing by livestock, and development. The species may suffer losses from oil spills, flying accidents, and is susceptible to avian influenza, so may be threatened by future outbreaks of the disease. The species is also threatened by hunting, nest destruction and by subsistence egg collecting.

Appearance & Lifespan

As with all swans, Whooper swans are known for their elegant beauty. Whooper Swans are completely white with black legs and feet as well as a black eye. The black and yellow markings on the bill of the Whooper Swan are like a human fingerprint; they are all different and individual birds can be recognized by their bill pattern.

Whooper Swans are around 55-65 inches in length with a wingspan of 80-110 inches. They weigh between 18-44 lbs. The life span of a Whooper Swan is on average 7 years but can be much longer than that in the right conditions.



Behavior & Reproduction

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 of time. The whooper swan spends most of its time swimming, straining the water for food, or eating plants that grow on the bottom.

Whooper swans have a deep honking call and are powerful fliers. Whooper swans can migrate hundreds of miles to their wintering sites in northern Europe and eastern Asia. Whooper swans pair for life, and their cygnets stay with them all winter; they are sometimes joined by offspring from previous years. The breeding season generally starts around mid-May. 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 nest is a large mound of plant materials built on dry ground or in reed beds on small islands in or along the edges of lakes, pools or rivers. The same nest mound may be used over several years although it is often repaired and new material is added. The female will usually lay 4-7 eggs. The cygnets hatch after about 36 days and have a grey or brown plumage. The cygnets can fly at an age of 4-5 months.

Ecology & Conservation

This species is predominantly migratory and travels over land making brief stops. Whooper Swans breed in Iceland and the north of Europe and Asia. They migrate south in the winter to west and central Europe, to around the Black, Aral and Caspian Seas and to China and Japan. The birds that winter in Scotland come from Iceland arriving around October and returning to Iceland during April.

The Whooper Swan's diet consists of the leaves, stems and roots of aquatic plants, grasses, sedges and horsetails. During the winter they will eat agricultural grain, vegetables and acorns, and on the breeding grounds young birds often eat insects. Adults may also eat marine and freshwater mussels.

At the zoo the Whooper Swans are fed goose food, oyster shells, large grit and romaine lettuce.

Did You Know?

1. Whooper Swans congregate in flocks of up to 400 individuals in the winter.
2. Whooper Swans fly in V formations like geese.
3. A group of swans has many different names, including a "ballet", "bevy", "drift", "regatta", and "school" of swans.

