**On the Wildside**

**Swans in Berwickshire**

Written by DAVID LONG

Apart from the Robin, the Mute Swan must be one of the British birds which just about everyone can identify. In Berwickshire we have two species of swan which can be seen regularly. The first is the Whooper Swan, sometimes called the Wild Swan, a winter visitor from its breeding grounds in Iceland, arriving in October and departing in March. It can be recognised by its yellow and black bill. In the Lothians and Borders they are concentrated around Fenton Barns and Tyninghame in East Lothian and all along the Tweed basin from the River Teviot almost to Berwick-upon-Tweed. They can often be seen near Allanton and Whitsome in young cereal fields and stubble. A few pairs have been known to breed in the Scottish Highlands.

As a resident the Mute Swan is more familiar, with a distinctive orange and black bill, and is found breeding on almost every lake and large pond. But was this always so? Early reports before 1700 suggest that the Mute Swan was not native but introduced into Scotland, for example released at Duddingston Loch in Edinburgh in 1678, and some authorities regarded them as a domesticated species, both as an ornamental bird and as a culinary delicacy. In England it is considered to be indigenous.

In the Lothians and Borders there are now several hundred pairs, and it appears that there is now a shortage of suitable nest sites. Mute Swans can be very territorial and aggressive, and if you or your dog get too close to a breeding pair the male ‘cob’ will not hesitate to attack – so beware! They are also very hostile to others swans, which was seen at Duns Castle recently when two pairs tried to nest on the Hen Poo. One male attacked and killed the cygnets of the rival pair.

Mute Swans do not breed until they are four years old, so there are large numbers of young birds around which tend to congregate in the lower Tweed valley and estuary. Recently, on a walk along the Tweed east of Sprouston we came on a turnip field with 92 swans feasting on the crop and to my surprise all were Mute Swans. Close to our house is Spottiswoode Loch where a pair always take up residence, usually breeding successfully. In 2014 only one cygnet survived to maturity, but since then numbers have increased with 8 reared in 2019 and 7 this year. The young hang around until the winter but at some point get kicked out by the adults and fly off to join the others on the Tweed.