

## NOTES ON THE ESSEX COUNTY WHOOPER SWANS, 1993-1997

By Jim Berry

Since the arrival of three Whooper Swans (*Cygnus cygnus*) in the Ipswich/Beverly area of Essex County in northeastern Massachusetts in the spring of 1993, local swandom has never been the same. The Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) in Ipswich, of which there have recently been three nesting pairs, have suddenly had their territories invaded by swans that, though somewhat smaller, are even more aggressive than the Mutes. These rowdy newcomers do not back off from a fight and refuse to be chased away. This state of affairs has been of no small concern to the resident Mute Swans, even costing at least one of them its life.

The origin of the Ipswich Whoopers has been a subject of speculation among birders, but I have ascertained through conversations with a variety of people, including the head of the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program at the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, that the original birds either escaped from or were released by a waterfowl breeder (see accompanying article). This is a virtual certainty, and birders should be assured that these swans are not of wild origin, and they did not get here on their own from Eurasia. The original 1993 Whoopers were very approachable and much photographed from close range, and though most of the local Whoopers are not banded, I observed a band on one of the birds in February 1995 on a field in Ipswich. It is also important to know that waterfowl keepers are not required to band their birds, though they are not allowed to release them in the open unless they are pinioned. They do usually clip off the hind toe, but this is something I have not been able to observe on the local Whoopers. (Whether there have been genuinely wild Whooper Swans elsewhere in eastern North America in recent years is another question, which I will comment on later.)

In the spring of 1994, the three "original" Ipswich Whoopers from 1993 were joined at least briefly by three immature Whoopers still showing some gray in their plumage. The younger birds disappeared that summer, although one of them may have stayed around and become the fourth adult of the group that has been present on and off ever since.

The interspecific action was first observed that same year, 1994. With the aid of Margaret Wood, who has long kept a journal on the Clark Pond Mute Swans, and Dorothy, Ed, and Anne Monnelly and Butch Johnson, who have kept me informed on the Rantoul Pond birds, I have been able to reconstruct some of the social history of these swans. While the third pair of Ipswich Mutes has so far nested and raised its young along the tidal Ipswich River free from Whooper interference, the two pond pairs have had their lives changed in a big way. Two of the Whoopers, almost certainly males, muscled their way into the

Mute Swan nesting territories on these two ponds and have become part of their adopted "families" in every way but genetically. If you visit Rantoul Pond or Clark Pond almost any time of year except when they have frozen solid (which takes longer than it would without swans, since I have seen these huge birds icebreaking with their chests to keep water open as long as possible), you will see three adult swans of two species peaceably coexisting, whether or not young are present. If danger (or a handout) is perceived, you will see the entire group approach the intruder, often noisily: the whooping of the well-named Whooper accompanying various snorts, grunts, and whistles from the misnamed Mutes.

The Whooper on Rantoul Pond had the easier time getting established; by April 1994 the Mutes had accepted him into the family and both the Monnellys and I occasionally observed all three birds together *on* the nest at the edge of the pond in front of their house that spring. The one surviving young turned out to be a Mute Swan, but the Whooper — I came to call him the "Godfather" — nevertheless became very protective of his adopted family. (My use of the term "family" should not be interpreted to imply interbreeding of the two species, since no hybrid young have yet been conclusively observed in the area.)

This close interspecific relationship continued unchanged on Rantoul Pond during the 1995, 1996, and 1997 nesting seasons (six, four, and seven Mute Swans fledged, respectively), right into the fall each year. And it apparently continues through the winter, for even when the two ponds are iced over, these interspecific swan "families" continue to be seen in the vicinity. They do not seem to wander very far from their nesting territories, but this is not certain, especially for the Whoopers; see below on other northeastern U.S. winter sightings of Whooper Swans.

The Whooper Swan that decided to settle at Clark Pond had a much harder time gaining acceptance from the local Mutes, but eventually succeeded in establishing the same "Godfather" relationship with a pair of them. All during 1994, as he tried to ingratiate himself with the Mute pair that had long nested there, he met with stiff resistance. Margaret Wood sent me copious notes on how the male Mute would try to chase him off the pond every single time he landed, and how he kept coming back again and again, day after day, month after month. None of those swans had much peace that year, the female Mute raising only two of their six young to fledging while her mate fought off the uninvited guest that refused to take the hint. Swans are not subtle creatures.

Everything changed at Clark Pond in 1995. On April 7 the Whooper, still intent on claiming the territory, attacked and killed a Mute Swan at the edge of Plum Island Sound, only yards from Clark Pond, as stunningly documented by Gina and Web Jackson (*Bird Observer*, V.23 No. 6, Dec. 1995, pp. 345-46). I believe it is safe to assume that the bird killed was the male Mute of the Clark Pond pair — perhaps now sick or injured — because the aggression of the year before never recurred, and because the sitting female of that pair soon after

abandoned her nest and the territory. Very soon a new pair of Mute Swans, probably young nonbreeding birds, moved onto the pond and set up housekeeping. They quickly accepted the presence of the more aggressive Whooper, and though they didn't nest in 1995, they successfully raised one young to full size in 1996. In 1997 they raised seven young to fledging. As of this writing, both of these interspecific swan groups are contentedly pursuing their alternative lifestyles on their respective ponds.

At this point I want to reemphasize that to my knowledge no hybridization between the local Mute and Whooper Swans has yet taken place. I have personally observed all the young produced on Rantoul and Clark Ponds from 1994 through 1997, and all have grown up to look like Mute Swans. All of them, typically, have been expelled from their parents' territories before their first winter and before they molted into their white adult plumage. But by September of each year, all these juvenile swans have exhibited not only the slightly concave upper mandible characteristic of the species, but also the black triangle between the eye and the squared-off base of the bill, something entirely lacking on juvenile Whooper Swans. Also, on September 14, 1997, I observed the beginning growth of the knob at the base of the upper mandible on all 14 juvenile swans (seven on each pond). This also is indicative of pure Mute Swan genes. In addition, I am aware of no recent reports of suspicious, hybrid-like swans in this part of New England.

The second chapter of this amazing story began on or about October 1, 1996, when two other Whooper Swans (likely but not conclusively two more of the six from 1994) showed up on Rantoul Pond — with four grown young! My friend Butch Johnson, who lives at the back of the pond, first observed them at that time, and later told me that almost immediately the Godfather Whooper, now in his third year of attachment to his adopted Mute Swan family, attacked one of the new Whooper young and tried to drown it, which is how the Whooper killed the Mute Swan near Clark Pond in 1995. He might have succeeded except for Butch's intervention — he threw apples at it! Apparently no further attacks were made by the Godfather, since all four Whooper young were alive and well at freeze-up later in the fall.

I independently discovered the new Whooper family two weeks later on October 13, when I went to Rantoul Pond to check on the waterfowl it attracts in migration. With great anticipation I watched the two swan families approach each other, and the adult Mutes begin to silently swim after and isolate various of the Whooper young, their wings raised in aggression. The Whoopers made no similar moves on the four grown Mute young. The Whooper parents watched this harassment for a while, then, singly or together, they flew directly at the offending Mute Swan, whooping loudly to drive it off, sometimes nipping at the enemy's tail if the Mute didn't get out of the way fast enough. This went on for several episodes over the next half-hour, and after each successful intervention

the Whooper parents would bob their necks to each other and whoop — apparently the Whooper Swan version of a high-five. Then the families retired to different parts of the pond to rest and preen (and perhaps to get ready for the next skirmish; I learned from Butch Johnson that this fighting had been going on daily for two weeks, and probably nightly as well, judging by the racket he heard at all hours of the day and night).

The Whooper Godfather, despite his attempt two weeks earlier to drown one of the Whooper juveniles, watched all this interaction intently but did not participate, perhaps because his adopted Mute young were not being threatened. One wonders if he was experiencing divided loyalties watching his conspecifics fight with his adopted family. Although he and his Clark Pond counterpart had been fiercely protective of their adopted young, the invading Whooper parents were probably known to him, and one or both were possibly related to him, again assuming that they could have been part of the original group of six Ipswich Whoopers from 1994. It is conceivable that a given animal would be more reluctant to attack its own relatives or “friends” than unknown individuals, given similar situations. But this is all conjecture, for without banding or some means of recognizing the individual birds it is not possible to be sure of such relationships. In any event, the reasons for his apparent neutrality in this case are something we will never know.

Butch Johnson was certain that the Whoopers had not nested on Rantoul Pond, but had arrived there only in October. Wherever this successful nesting of Whooper Swans took place — elsewhere in Essex County? farther north? — it came at an interesting time, for in that same year, 1996, the species was confirmed breeding (cygnets observed) on Attu Island at the end of the Aleutian chain (Paul J. Baicich, pers. comm.). This Alaska nesting apparently constituted the first wild breeding of Whooper Swans in North America, while the nesting in the northeast may have been the first North American nesting of escaped Whoopers outside captivity.

But it may not have been the only local nesting. The new Whooper family, perhaps tired of fighting for a place on Rantoul Pond, took up residence later in the fall of 1996 on the Plum Island section of the nearby Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. Four of the six, including both adults, were still alive and well on Plum Island as of the end of July 1997 (Phyllis and Bill Drew, pers. comm.). Yet in the first week of June 1997, four unbanded Whooper Swans, one adult and three yearlings, showed up on Great Bay, Rockingham County, New Hampshire, near the Newmarket/Durham town line, about 28 miles north of Ipswich (Steve Mirick, pers. comm.). Barring additional releases or escapes, these young may represent a second nesting in 1996. Could it have been by the last two of the six 1994 birds, whose whereabouts had not been reported for three years? The New Hampshire adult, adduced to be a male by its extremely aggressive behavior toward the much larger Mute Swan population on Great

Bay, is, like the Ipswich birds, relatively tame around humans, and is not above accepting food from them. Furthermore, the numbers add up; the two "Godfathers" and two nesting pairs would account for the six original birds from 1993-1994. Whatever the case, the known local population is now up to at least ten birds, five adults and five from the class of 1996. However, there is no evidence of Whooper Swan nesting in 1997, because one breeding bird was apparently widowed and the other nesting pair had not expelled their 1996 young from their Plum Island territory as of July 1997.

As for the unusual Godfather relationship, a subject of speculation is whether the addition of a third adult swan gives cygnets of any species a better chance of survival. To be sure, the Mute Swan population is expanding on the North Shore of Massachusetts without help from Whooper godparents. For example, Margaret Wood reports that the Mute Swans on Clark Pond have raised 58 cygnets to fledging in the 15 years from 1983 through 1997 — an average of almost four per year. But she has also observed the Clark Pond Whooper pulling up food for the newly hatched Mute cygnets, and it is conceivable, if not likely, that the addition of a third "parent" to a swan family would give the young that much more of a chance to fledge, just as the parenting behavior of young from previous clutches helps the newest young in various species of swallows, jays, and other passerines.

Significant ethical issues arise as a result of these events in the local swan world. The Attu Whoopers are wild birds, and no one would seriously argue that they should be controlled. The Massachusetts Whoopers are not wild (at least by origin), with the result that opinion is split on whether action should be taken to blunt the possible establishment of a breeding population of Whooper Swans in New England. Accompanying this article is a position statement from the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife on what has been or might be done with regard to exotic swan populations.

Our swan saga ends with some additional perspective. The local area around Essex County, Massachusetts and adjacent Rockingham County, New Hampshire is not the only place Whooper Swans have been showing up. Starting in 1993, sightings have been reported in *American Birds* and its successor publication, *National Audubon Society Field Notes*, from (south to north) North Carolina; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; Long Island and Monroe County, New York; Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; New Brunswick; Anticosti Island and the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec; and Cape North, Labrador. The Long Island and Martha's Vineyard birds could have been escapes from a Long Island breeder, but the origin of all them is unknown. It is possible that some of the Essex County Whoopers could have explored the east coast during parts of various winters, since that is when most of these reports were made. But with sketchy information and no way to identify individual

birds, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about whether any of these swans were the Ipswich Whoopers, other escapes, or genuinely wild birds.

It is the Quebec and Labrador Whoopers that offer the best possibility of being wild. The Gaspé birds, three adults, were seen in late July 1994; three adults showed up in Labrador a few weeks later. Both groups were reported as very wary, unlike the Ipswich birds, and it is probable that these were the same three birds. The Whoopers on Anticosti Island were two subadults seen in June 1995, which means they were almost certainly not from Ipswich, since the six original Ipswich birds were all adults by then, and Whooper nesting was not known in this area until 1996. In view of the fact that Whooper Swans are very common breeders in Iceland and often turn up in Greenland, it would hardly be surprising for them to occasionally extend their wanderings to the Maritime provinces. From eastern Canada it is only another few hundred miles to New England; if wild European birds find an established population of Whoopers here, who knows what could happen?

But enough speculation. Time and research may answer some of these questions. Meanwhile, Whooper Swans should be carefully observed wherever they are found, especially for wildness versus willingness to come to humans for handouts, as well as for leg bands. Birders should routinely report Whooper Swan numbers, ages, activities, and interaction with other species to *Bird Observer* and/or *Field Notes* regional editors for evaluation. The more information we have at hand, the sooner we can begin to understand what is going on with these impressive waterfowl.

**Jim Berry** is a member of the *Bird Observer* staff whose special interests are the birds of Essex County and nesting birds in general. Jim would like to thank Phyllis and Bill Drew, Tom French, Marta Hersek, Wayne Petersen, and Margaret Wood for invaluable comments on a draft of this article.

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