



Mute Swan

The mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) is native to Europe and parts of Asia and was introduced into North America as decorative waterfowl for parks, zoos, and private estates during the late 1870s. However, by the early 1900s, a small number of birds escaped into the wild in New Jersey and New York. These birds provided the nucleus for the current Atlantic Flyway population. The first sign of mute swans in Rhode Island occurred on Block Island in 1923, and then in coastal ponds in 1930. With very few predators and plentiful resources, the Atlantic Flyway population more than doubled between 1986 and 2002, increasing from about 6,300 to more than 14,000 swans. While beautiful, these large birds have negative impacts on our native waterfowl species and the aquatic ecosystems they inhabit.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: In the United States, mute swans are found from New England south to Virginia and around the Great Lakes Region. During the winter, Rhode Island's mute swans will only move toward the coastline if their inland water habitats completely freeze; otherwise mute swans in the US typically do not migrate. Mute swans can be found in fresh, brackish and saltwater wetland habitats. They are highly adaptable, living in urban ponds, lakes, bogs and estuaries. Phragmites reed and cattail stands are preferred by nesting mute swans, providing excellent cover for eggs. Stands can become so dense that they are nearly impenetrable to potential predators.

Behavior: Mute swans are protective parents, guarding their territory from predators, other waterfowl and any other possible threats, including humans. It is not uncommon for mute swans to push native waterfowl species out of ponds, forcing them to occupy less

suitable habitat. While swans are picturesque, it is important to remember that they are wild animals and are capable of capsizing personal watercrafts, especially while protecting their eggs and young. Mute swans are best viewed from a distance. Only a few animals prey on mute swans in the early stages of life. Raccoons will take advantage of an empty nest to sample the large eggs, but if the adult is close by, the mammal is chased away. Snapping turtles will take cygnets during the first few weeks of life.

Food Habits: Mute swans eat a variety of aquatic plants and occasionally consume fish, frogs, tadpoles, mollusks and insects. Using their clawed feet, they can dislodge tubers beneath the water's surface, killing the plant entirely. This is unlike the feeding habits of our native waterfowl species which pick off portions of submerged aquatic vegetation allowing for the plants to continue to grow. Mute swans, when flocking during the summer molt, can number in the hundreds on small coastal ponds. Large flocks combined with their feeding habits can lead to significant damage to the these aquatic ecosystems.

IDENTIFICATION

Mute swans are large, heavy bodied waterfowl with short legs. Their long, thin necks are often held in S-shape. They have white plumage and a bright orange bill, with black skin around the base and a knob on top. Juveniles are tinged with darker coloration and have a pale bill.

Length: 50 - 60 in

Wingspan: 82 - 94 in

Weight: 12 - 31 lbs

Lifespan: 7 years

Reproduction: Swans are capable of breeding by their third spring and will continue breeding throughout their life. On average they need 4.5 acres of habitat for nesting and brood rearing. This selected territory may be defended year-round but is strictly protected when active nests or young are present. Mute swan nests are about 5 feet across and 1.5 to 2 feet tall, and are made of aquatic vegetation and down feathers. They are typically built in the same location each year, directly on top of the previous year's nesting material. Two to five bluish-green eggs are laid in the early spring, changing to a whitish-gray before hatching a little over a month later. Chicks, called cygnets, are born precocial (feathered with eyes open) and will only stay in the nest for a day. After 60 days, cygnets can fly and will remain with their family unit through the winter.

Disease: As with other waterfowl, mute swans can carry [Avian Influenza](#) and other diseases. Feeding waterfowl increases the risk for disease transfer. **Never feed wildlife, it is harmful to both humans and wildlife.**

LIVING WITH MUTE SWANS

While striking in appearance, mute swans are not native to the Americas. Their large size and territorial demeanor stifle our native waterfowl species, which are already struggling due to habitat degradation. Thanks to management practices by the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife, such as egg-addling, the population of mute swans has decreased since an all-time high of about 1,500 in 1999 and is currently estimated at around 500 in Rhode Island (2019). This has liberated resources for our native species, aiding in population growth.

Always remember, mute swans should be viewed from a distance. Should you come across a mute swan while boating, turn around or give the animal the widest possible berth.

REGULATORY STATUS

The importation, exportation, possession, liberation, or sale of any mute swan and/or their eggs is prohibited (*RIHR 9.17.B*). As of 2005, mute swans are not afforded protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, falling under the list of non-native species. Each state can issue depredation permits to help with control efforts according to the USFWS mute swan policy set forth in 2002. There is no open season on mute swans in Rhode Island, however other states do provide this opportunity to harvest the species and contribute to population control.

DID YOU KNOW...

- Mute swans are not actually mute, but they do make a much quieter sound than our native swans.
- Young mute swans are called cygnets.
- The oldest mute swan in North America was banded and recovered in Rhode Island and lived to be 26 years and 9 months old.
- A mute swan's wingbeats can be heard up to a mile away.
- Mute swans can eat up to 8 pounds of aquatic plants in a day.
- Mute swans carry their young on their backs or beneath their wings.
- Two native North American swan species occasionally visit Rhode Island: the tundra swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) and the trumpeter swan (*Cygnus buccinator*)

