

Black Swans

by Sheldon Dingle
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Come to think about it, English is a rather curious language. A male swan, for example, is not a cock but a cob. The female swan is called a pen rather than a hen, and the chicks are not chicks — they are cygnets. Strange words aside, the swans are among the most familiar and beautiful birds on earth. And they are among the most impressive, having worked their way into countless legends and mythological tales of mankind's ancient and dim past.

Most swans (there are eight generally recognized species) are snowy white in color. Indeed, their very whiteness has lent them a sort of elegant impeccability not often given to a lesser bird. There are two exceptions, however, the black-necked swan and the bird on our cover this issue, the black swan.

The black swan (*Cygnus atratus*) is native to Australia and also thrives in New Zealand where it was introduced about 180 years ago. Of all the swans, the black is one of the most easily kept and bred in captivity. Both sexes incubate the eggs and care for the cygnets and occasionally a male will hatch and rear the young alone if his mate should die.

All swans tend to be somewhat territorial and protective of their nest sites although this tendency is very much softened among the semi-domestic mute swans. The black swans, too, are more mild than the other species but even so are prone to attack when pressed. Indeed, when our pair of blacks were nesting the male would attack even large hay trucks that came onto the property for deliveries. That is permissible. I had to draw the line, however, at the unprovoked sneak-attacks he launched at me every time my back was turned. I no longer cross the line when the old boy is up and about.

If you have a bit of room for a pond, you can do no better than to plant lawn and shrubs around it and install a resident pair of black swans. Life will be more enjoyable, believe me. ●

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