

RAISING australian Black swans

by Mrs. Ken McConnell

Cygnus atratus, the Australian Black Swan, is described in the Encyclopedia of Aviculture as follows: The main color is greyish-black, relieved only by white flights. Iris deep red; bill red with white band towards the tip; legs and feet black. Although this is a very accurate description, it falls far short of doing justice to this magnificently beautiful bird. The feathers are not only greyish-black, but ruffled as well to add a little extra touch of elegance. The sleek white flight feathers provide a startling contrast.

The deep red iris is bright and full of lustre. The red bill, especially in breeding season, is a brilliant red. Their very long neck and head is carried in a manner that can best be described in "proud".

Black swans have a high-pitched, very musical bugle that takes many forms in various situations. Their courtship involves a great deal of talking, bobbing and diving and is culminated with a high-pitched cry of sheer exuberance. They are completely monogamous and extremely affectionate and devoted to each other.

Fortunately for those of us who choose to keep and raise these beautiful birds, the Black Swan adapts well to a wide variety of climates and situations and is successfully raised in all parts of the United States and Europe. Those of us who live on the West Coast are particularly fortunate as our generally mild climate provides a prolonged breeding season without the necessity of providing shelter against the cold of the northern winters.

Keeping Black Swan on a pond, lake, or reservoir is the most convenient and certainly the most beautiful method one could hope for. The natural vegetation found on the banks of the pond and the water plants and their roots will provide the bulk of the food the swans require. As this is their natural food, it is probably also the best.

The nutritional value of this vegetation does vary from one location to another so a supplement of mixed grain or pelletized feed or a combination of both should be available to them to be sure of adequate

nutrition. Most of the large feed companies prepare a Game Bird Feed which is very good. A 16% to 18% protein, with vitamins and minerals added is an ideal diet.

Those of us who do not have such ideal conditions must put a little more effort into building a suitable pond for our swans. Of all the swans, the Black Swan is satisfied with the smallest area of water. A cement pond, six by twelve feet is ample water for a pair of Blacks. They should have at least a ten by twenty land space, and more if it is available. It is perfectly possible to raise Blacks successfully in any average back yard.

Provisions must be made for draining and re-filling the pond with clean water. It is best to do this daily. Sanitary living conditions are as essential to the good health of your swans as for yourself.

There is some disagreement as to the value of feeding lettuce trimmings to confined birds, but I feel that it has considerable merit. Although lettuce has very little nutritional value, it is a natural type of food for them and they thoroughly enjoy it. It provides bulk and fiber which aids in digestion and elimination. It occupies time and energy which relieves boredom. Lettuce trimmings usually can be obtained at a local market and cost nothing but the small amount of time involved in getting and feeding it.

Breeding season for Black Swans living in the northern hemisphere begins in fall, usually late October or November and continues on through late spring. In northern California this is also the beginning of the rainy season which does have a definitely stimulating effect on the birds. I've noticed that in drought years when the rains were late in coming the birds were also late in laying.

The male is the nest builder, building a large nest three to five feet in diameter and a foot high if enough nest material is available to him. I've found that hay is considerably better than straw as it isn't as slippery and it doesn't break up and compact as easily. The hay remains intact and doesn't become so matted that rain water can't run off or through.

As soon as the pair of Swans has

selected their nesting site the cobb will start gathering up bits of grass, leaves, twigs, or whatever is available and it starts building. The hay should be provided at that time, not directly on the spot but near enough that it can be easily picked up by the cobb and placed as he would like it. Some pairs will accept a nest house, others will not.

The pen (female swan) will lay her first large greenish colored eggs within a very short time after the nest has been started and continue laying every other day until she has completed her clutch of five to eight eggs. Six eggs to a clutch is the average. I've observed that each individual pen has her own average so if she has established a clutch size of five, six, or seven eggs, she will continue to lay that number each time she lays. The eggs are incubated 36 to 37 days, and all of the eggs in a clutch will usually hatch within forty-eight hours.

Unlike other species of swan, the Black Cob takes his regular turn at incubating the eggs so that the pen can bathe, feed and drink without leaving her eggs unattended.

If one wishes to raise more than one clutch of cygnets from a pair, the cygnets may be removed from their parents as soon as they have been hatched. Usually within thirty days the adults will be building a new nest and laying a second clutch of eggs in one season.

Although swans are very good parents who aggressively and conscientiously care for their young, we take the cygnets as soon as they are hatched and place them in a brooder. The size of the brooder box isn't too important so long as it is large enough to house a clutch of six or seven cygnets for a couple of weeks. A regular brooder light provides the heat and should be adjusted so that the temperature directly under the light is 95-100° for the first week, then should be lowered to 80° after that.

The Black cygnets are especially hardy and have a very thick coat of down so it isn't advisable to keep them too warm. They are also very talkative and don't hesitate to let one know when they're uncomfortable. They're noisily complain-

ing if they are cold, gasping for air if it's too warm.

There is rarely a problem in getting them started eating. A gallon size water container which is made for brooders will provide ample drinking water for them at this stage of their life. Although their parents would take them to the pond at this point, a swimming pool is not at all necessary or even advisable without mother to care for them and guide them.

Finely chopped lettuce placed in their water is usually their first taste of food and they take to it readily and easily. The yolk of hard boiled egg, finely mashed, along with prepared Startena feed is all that they require. A good Startena, or pullet developer feed is made by Purina and other feed companies as well. Just

be sure that the feed is no more than 18-20% protein, and I feel that the 18% is better than the higher amount. They especially like the egg yolk and it provides the high energy boost that gets them off to a good start.

The cygnets should be pinioned within two or three days after hatching whether they are kept in a brooder or with their parents. At this very early age it is a completely painless and usually bloodless operation.

Within two to three weeks, depending somewhat on outside weather conditions, the cygnets are ready to be placed in a small outside pen with their own pond. By this time they are eating well and able to break up and eat the lettuce leaves without it's being chopped for them.

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Nesting pair Black Swans

Photo courtesy of Los Angeles Zoo



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It is necessary to provide shelter and heat for them. We use a 4' x 4' x 4' nest house, open on one side, with a brooder light for heat and hay for bedding. They are introduced to their new environment by placing them in the house and shutting it for thirty minutes or so. A board twelve inches wide is a sufficient barrier. The board is then removed so that they may come out whenever they choose. The cygnets, like all young things are naturally curious and eager to investigate their new surroundings. A few lettuce leaves scattered over their pond soon leads them into the water and in a very short time they are all in the water enjoying their new adventure.

They seldom remain in the water long the first time, but scurry back to the nest box, the light and the heat which has become a symbol of home and security. Their next venture in will be of longer duration and so on and in the space of a few hours they are veteran swimmers as at home in the water as in the nest box.

By allowing the young cygnets to adjust to their new situation at their own time and inclination, there is no fright or panic, no water soaked or chilled birds.

After two or three weeks, the protein content of their feed should be reduced to no more than 16% as the Black cygnets grow so rapidly that their size may outstrip their bone and muscle strength.

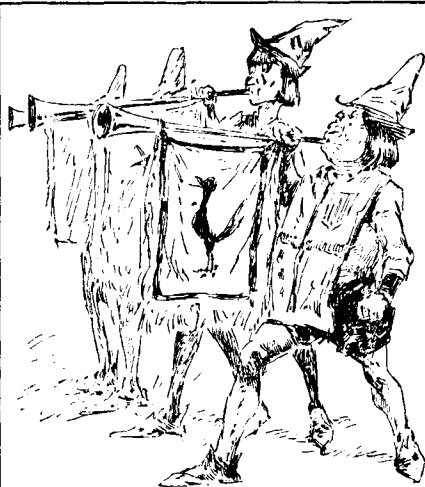
Their legs might not be strong enough to support their weight and their wings not strong enough to support the weight of the feathers they are growing.

There is some feathering about the eyes at 30-35 days, and on the lower neck and upper tail at about 55 days. Between 75 and 95 days the young are fully feathered except for some down on the lower back and wings. At 140-180 days the young swan is fully feathered and ready to fly if it were not pinioned.

Good and nourishing food, reasonably clean living conditions, a small pond of clean water and a little privacy for nesting are all that is needed to successfully raise Black Swans.

Each of us wants to make our swan area as beautiful as is possible. A little thought as to landscaping certainly adds a great deal of beauty with very little time or expense. Evergreen shrubs or trees require very little care and provide shade and privacy for the birds. Flowering shrubs provide a beautiful background for these colorful birds and adds much to our own pleasure in caring for them.

The Australian Black is surely the most friendly, boistrous, talkative, gregarious, and prolific of all the swan. To top all that, it is also the easiest to raise and care for. Small wonder so many of us feel they are an essential addition to our waterfowl collection. ■



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