



PRETTY, BAD

Mute swans in Oregon
BY ELIOT TREICHEL

“I wish they were ugly,” says Rick Boatner, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s invasive species and wildlife integrity coordinator, “but they’re really quite beautiful.”

He’s speaking of the mute swan, the only bird on the Oregon Invasive Species Council’s 100 Worst list — a bird that is decidedly not ugly. “They get people’s emotions up,” Boatner says, in no small part because of their looks. “These are political birds.”

The mute swan (*Cygnus olor*), a native of northern and central Eurasia, was brought to the U.S. late in the 19th century to decorate parks and estates. It’s easy to see why: On water, mute swans move with grace. Their all-white plumage and long, elegant necks are arresting. In mating rituals, two birds will sometimes face one another and gently touch heads — their mirrored necks forming the iconic shape of a heart.

While they are less vocal than other swans, mute swans are not actually mute. And in contrast to their refinement, they can be quite aggressive, hissing at and attacking other waterfowl, dogs and even people when they feel their territory is being invaded. It’s this aggressiveness, along with their lack of natural predators and their heavy consumption of submerged aquatic vegetation, that makes the mute swan so threatening to native wildlife.

Mute swans don’t appear to migrate, and their yearlong use of an area thins the amount of food available to transitional birds, including trumpeter and tundra swans. Not only do mute swans pull up vegetation by the roots, they also forcefully paddle with their feet, breaking whole plants loose. Without the shelter provided by submerged vegetation, fish hatchlings, native turtles and even microinvertebrates, those little creatures that make up such an important part of the food chain, are harmed.

Boatner says ODFW doesn’t have a very clear count on the number of mute swans in the wild. Certainly the numbers aren’t as daunting as they are around the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay, where a few escaped birds turned into flocks of several thousand and are still growing.

In Oregon, mute swans are classified as a controlled species. Some landowners utilize the birds to help manage Canada goose populations, while others still keep them as ornamentals. Although it is illegal to import mute swans, it is legal to possess and sell them as long as the males are neutered or the bird’s wings are pinioned (clipped so they can’t fly). Do residents always follow the law? According to Boatner, no.

“Most people don’t even consider if there are laws or regulations in place before purchasing swans,” he says, noting how easy it is to get birds today via the internet.

When ODFW receives notice of a mute swan in the wild, they will lethally remove it. In other cases they try to work directly with landowners, who oftentimes use other control measures such as adding or oiling eggs so they won’t hatch.

While it likely will be impossible to eradicate mute swans from Oregon, it may still be possible to keep the population in check. To Boatner, good information is crucial: “There is not enough manpower or funding to monitor or eradicate all invasive species, so education is a key factor to protect the state.”

The idiom “swan song” refers to an individual’s final act before retirement. It comes from the old belief that mute swans were silent during their lives, right up to their deaths, when they would sing an exquisite song. It’s an eerily lovely image, but also a legend. For many folks concerned about invasive species, it’d be okay if mute swans sang goodbye — even better if they never really stayed in the first place. 🌱

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