

# Anglers in flap as swans wreak havoc on rivers

By Valerie Elliott  
Countryside Editor

ANGLERS are on the warpath and the surprising target of their anger is the swan.

Anglers and owners of fisheries are reporting serious problems with the large numbers of swans on some of the finest chalk rivers in southern England. The alleged crime of the elegant mute swan, or *Cygnus olor*, is that it devours tracts of an important river weed, *Ranunculus* or water crowfoot, which provides a protective cover for fish such as brown trout.

This habitat is also a breeding ground for flies and other invertebrates that the fish rely on for food.

Some syndicates and angling associations are suggesting that swan numbers need to be controlled.

The issue is sensitive. It is not just that the Crown technically owns all unmarked mute swans in open water, although the Queen as Seigneur of the Swans claims ownership of the birds only in certain parts of the Thames and its tributaries. The swan is also a protected species and it is against the law to meddle with it or its eggs.

There is also the bird's place in the national psyche. Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) want no part in any measure that would be seen as a death warrant.

The issue has been raised with Ben Bradshaw, the Minister for Nature Conservation and Fisheries, by the Wiltshire Fisheries' Association, the Salmon and Trout Association and the Anglers' Conservation

Association. He is about to approve more licences to shoot cormorants, which are ravaging fish stocks, but has said that he will not approve a cull for swans.

Even conservation bodies recognise that the impact of the swans on the vital river weed is serious and experts at Defra, English Nature and the Environment Agency are working on the problem. But it is not just about an explosion in swan numbers.

There is no official count for swans nationwide, although the Queen's Swan Marker, David Barber, counted 875 on the Thames in July, a rise of about 3 per cent.

The impact of the swans has more to do with diffuse pollution, over-abstraction, inefficient sewage treatment and

run-off from pesticides on river weed. There is much less *Ranunculus* grown in rivers and the swans are eating what remains. Conservation experts believe that in the long term the problem will be addressed by greener farming practices and cleaner waters that will restore the normal cycles of river systems.

In parts of the upper Avon, the Woodford Valley of the Avon and its tributaries, the Wylde and Nadar, swans are seen as pests.

Mike Trowbridge has been river-keeper at the Earl of Radnor's Longford Estate along the Avon near Salisbury for 24 years. He said: "The problem on our stretch is that a pair of black swans have turned up to breed and have taken over a section of the river. The

other white mute swans have now gathered in a group of 60 and have decimated a whole section of the river.

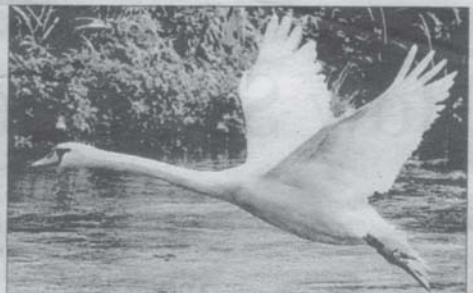
"With the river stripped of weed, the water level has dropped from 3ft to 18in. It is easier for cormorants to get at the fish and it is also affecting the fly life and the reproduction cycle of flies."

Paul Knight, the executive director of the Salmon and Trout Association, said: "The problem is environmental degradation. If there was enough water producing enough weed then the swans would not have any impact."

The Environment Agency confirmed that swans are now "a major issue" on chalk rivers. A Defra official said that ministers were waiting for advice from experts.

## FEATHERED FIENDS

- The mute swan has white feathers, a black facial knob and reddish-orange bill
- It is quite tame and semi-domesticated in behaviour
- The birds breed from March to June and the female lays up to eight eggs
- No one is legally permitted to eat mute swan. As a native wild bird, mute swans are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is an offence to intentionally harm the bird, its eggs or an active nest
- It is an offence to intentionally injure, take or kill a wild swan. It is also an offence to take or possess the egg of a wild mute swan, or to damage or destroy the nest of a mute swan while in use or being built
- From the 12th century, the King or Queen owned all mute swans. Today the Queen claims only the birds on parts of the Thames and rivers that run into it
- Since the 12th century, an annual census of swans has taken place to ensure that they



are not stolen or killed. This count is known as Swan Upping and it takes place on the third week of July from Sunbury-on-Thames to Abingdon

■ The Queen appoints a swan marker and a swan warden, a scientist from Oxford University, to count each swan along the river, check its health and give it an identification mark before releasing it