

## Book review

### A swan's tale

Eileen Rees: *Bewick's swan*. T & A.D. Poyser 2006. ISBN -10: 0713665599; 296 pp.

This Poyser monograph tells the tale of how an observant individual and a charismatic bird combined can grow into a long-term study teaching us many aspects of population ecology and wetland conservation. Sir Peter Scott, the founder of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust (WWT) in the UK was quick to realize in the early 1960s that overwintering Bewick's swans could be individually recognized by their bill pattern. As the number of overwintering swans increased over the years, trained observers could at times identify 400–600 individual a day; all of their bill patterns carefully recorded and all of them uniquely named. 'Lancelot', identified in the early years, lived to return each winter for 23 years. In Bewick's swans, parents and their cygnets tend to stay together during the first winter and UK-based researchers could therefore gain individual-based insights into the reproduction and survival of a species breeding 4,000 km away in the Arctic tundra.

The author Eileen Rees, a renowned expert on waterfowl and wetland conservation, was involved for over 30 years in work on Bewick's swans. In her monograph she shows how this individual-based study gives insight into life-history aspects, social behaviour and migration. As in many birds that live in high density groups during at least part of the year, dominance relationships are important and affect many aspects of their ecology in winter. Large parts of the book are dedicated to integrating these ecological aspects into a conservation biological framework. In fact, Bewick's swans can be considered a flagship species for wetland conservation in western Europe. The book benefits from the illustrations of Dafila Scott, capturing the elegance of the swans.

The book 'Bewick's swan' consists of eight chapters. The first chapter deals with taxonomic relationships between this species and other swans

and provides an in-depth view in Bewick's swans characters, including how the bill categorization works and the rare occurrence of phenodeviates (leucistic individuals). In the second part, the author provides a thorough overview of the abundance and range of the species. Lots of information has been compiled on the two main 'branches', the western (European) and eastern (Asian) populations. Briefly, the existing evidence for a Caspian (middle East) population is discussed as well. The main breeding areas of these populations is in the Arctic tundra, and – bit by bit – this chapter builds up a case story explaining how the complicated network of overwintering and breeding sites are interlinked. The book is thus certainly not confined to findings made at the swan lakes in the UK, and also presents a detailed discussion of the species' breeding biology in the tundra, and what is going on with the eastern population, wintering in China and Japan.

The main (middle) part consists of three chapters dealing with ecological aspects on foraging, breeding and social behaviour. Here, a wealth of information is presented, and the individual-based observations made throughout the years are used to provide many interesting results, but also many fine anecdotes on named individuals. I personally enjoyed the section on migration, which provided many nice results on the importance of the pair bond, but also thoughts on how cultural traditions on the overwintering site operate. In this middle section, the reader gets to appreciate the power of individual recognition more fully. The book ends with a chapter on the conservation of these birds, including an appendix listing key areas for the species in the world. After low numbers in the 1970s, the species is enjoying decent population sizes at the moment. At the same time, it is clear that a long-lived species with a limited reproductive rate and a long migration route to and from its Arctic breeding sites remains very sensitive to man-induced habitat alterations and to climatic changes taking place.

The picture of Bewick's swans that most

stayed with me after reading this book is one that is quite familiar to many of us. It is a story of swans, staying together throughout the years, gaining experience in functioning as a pair, and living a life rich and complex in social interactions with others of their kind. Despite presenting a fact-packed monograph covering essentially every aspect of Bewick's swans' life, Eileen Rees manages to give also space to personal recollections and quotes

from fellow workers. One particular striking one is how Sir Peter Scott gave up hunting after realizing the intricacies of family life of wild swans and geese. Such personal aspects in the narrative act to remind us that intensively working with long lived individuals not only produces facts and knowledge, but may also change the observer along the way.

**Jon Brommer**