

White Swan Policy

When the British first arrived in Australia they were amazed and thrilled by the beautiful indigenous Black Swan. In time however some people wished to be reminded of their homeland and for this reason, in 1897 three pairs of White (mute) Swans *Cygnus olor* arrived from Vintners Company of London, on board the S. S. DEVON. Two pairs were allocated to the City of Perth and one pair to the Zoological Gardens. Later records in 1912 state that swans were "turned out for acclimatization" and the breeding colony on the Avon River at Northam may have come from this source.

It is thought that other acclimatization attempts were also made throughout Australia: however to this day, the Northam colony is the only group of White Swans, as far as is known, surviving in the wild on the Australian mainland.

The White Swans which were in zoos and collections in Eastern Australia (excepting one in South Australia) have gradually died out. The same situation occurred in Western Australia until recently when a few strays from the Northam wild flock had been deposited (with ministerial approval) at the Perth Zoological Gardens and a few Wildlife Parks.

As the White (mute) Swan is an introduced (exotic) species that has positively established itself in Western Australia, its restriction in the wild to the Avon River at Northam is doubtful. This has been heightened in recent years by sightings at Warnbro, Mandurah, Busselton and Walpole and the possibility of a breeding pair re-establishing itself in a different part of Western Australia cannot be ignored. Swans eggs and cygnets have in the past been stolen from the Northam colony and it is possible that White Swans could appear in some private person's possession in the future.

Whilst appreciating the obvious beauty of the White Swan and its appeal to travellers and townspeople in Northam, the dangers of it expanding in numbers and

competing with our state emblem, the majestic Black Swan, must not be ignored. Corrective measures therefore have been taken.

Because of the tourist attraction and aesthetic value to Northam, plus the fact that it is the only existing wild colony in Western Australia, the animal has been declared "fauna" within the meaning of the Western Australian Wildlife Conservation Act. To further protect the bird from human interference it has been included in Western Australia's Rare "and in need of Special Protection" list. In 1978 a Departmental policy on the White (mute) Swan was therefore established and is as follows:

1. The existing colony on the Avon River at Northam should not be permitted to increase in size.
2. The release or establishment of other colonies, pairs or single Mute Swans should not be permitted elsewhere *in the wild* in Western Australia.
3. Feral Mute Swans (other than those of the existing Northam colony) should be recaptured and donated to the South Perth Zoological Gardens or to approved Wildlife Parks only. Where recapture is not possible, feral Mute Swans should be humanely despatched when a suitable opportunity presents.
4. Surplus stocks produced at Northam may only be distributed to the South Perth Zoological Gardens or to approved Wildlife Parks. All such animals must be pinioned and must be kept in an enclosure or enclosures which will allow any offspring produced to be easily captured. Such offspring must also be pinioned and may only be transferred to other approved Wildlife Parks or to the South Perth Zoo.

The purpose of establishing this policy was to prevent the possibility of White Swans becoming established elsewhere in the wild.



Mute Swans (*Cygnus Olor*) on the Avon river at Northam. These birds have existed in this locality for some seventy years. Mr E. Lawrence of Northam has been the guardian of this colony for many years and is one of the reasons for the birds continued success in the wild. The picture here is typical of the Avon habitat within the town boundaries.

Photo by E. Lawrence