

Swim, swan, swim!

If you go down to the Thames at the end of July, you may see the Royal Swan Marker and his fellow Swan Uppers – busy upping swans ...



Swan Upping is an ancient tradition on the river Thames which involves counting and marking all mute swans. It was first recorded in the twelfth century, when the monarchy claimed ownership of all mute swans in England. In 1482 Edward IV passed a Royal Charter stating that only landowners could own swans and only with the permission of the king.

In the past, swans were a prized source of meat and often appeared on the table at feasts and banquets, particularly in Elizabethan times. Their beaks also made hard-wearing quills. Kings and queens of England gave rights of swan ownership to various nobles, but over time swans became less popular. Catching broods of swans during Swan Upping was a labour intensive activity requiring many men – domestic poultry such as chicken, ducks and geese were much easier to raise. By the 1850s the rights to swan ownership had all but disappeared – except on the Thames where the Worshipful Company of Vintners and the Worshipful Company of Dyers retained their rights of ownership.

Every year in the third week of July, members of these two organizations along with representatives of the monarchy, set off in six traditional Thames rowing skiffs to complete a census of the swans on the Thames between Sunbury and Abingdon. They row upriver for 79 miles and it takes five days to complete their journey. One boat is for the Royal Swan Marker, appointed by the Queen, and the Royal Swan Warden. The other participants are Royal Swan Uppers and then the Swan Uppers of the Vintners' Company and Dyers' Company. They all wear traditional uniform and have flags and pennants on the boat to identify them.

When they spot a brood of cygnets, the cry of "All up!" is given to signal that the boats should get into position. The skiffs circle the birds and they are caught, (gently) bound and taken to shore. Here they are weighed and ringed. A ring on one leg means the swan belongs to Queen Elizabeth II, a ring on both legs means it belongs to the Vintners' and Dyers' Companies. After a health check, the birds are set free again.

These days, Swan Upping is more concerned with conservation than with ownership. School groups are invited to come and observe the Swan Uppers completing their census – it gives children the opportunity to see swans and cygnets close up. And for those who like facts and figures, the Royal Swan Marker publishes an annual report with details of swan and cygnet numbers after the Thames odyssey.

So why not wander along the Thames tow path from 20 to 24 July this year and watch a very traditional ceremony taking place: Swan Uppers upping swans.

If you would like to watch a video about Swan Upping (featuring the Queen's Swan Marker), then click [here](#) or if you would prefer this report from a rather bemused American CBS news reporter, then click [here](#).

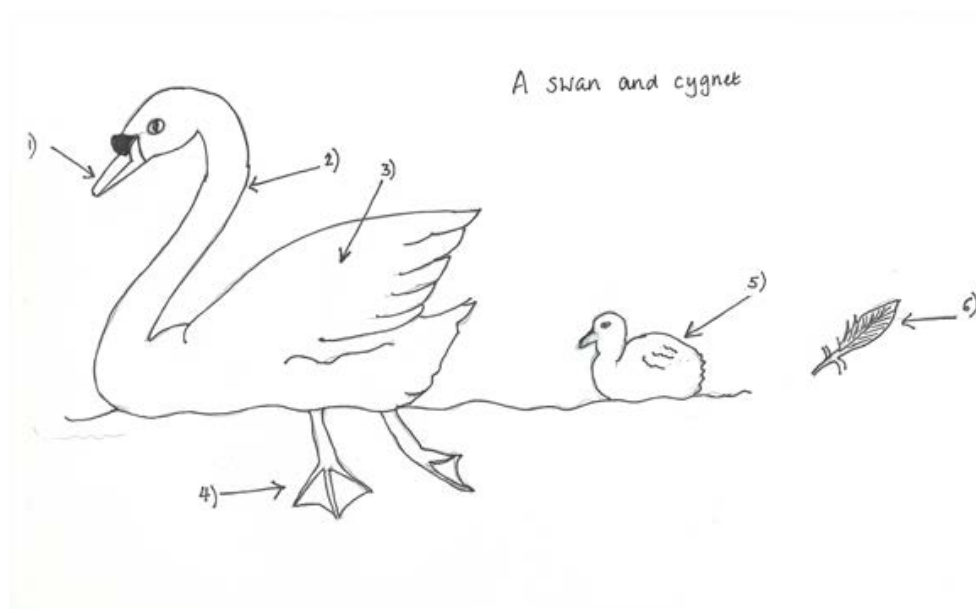
If you would like to read more about Swan Upping, then click [here](#).

And if you would like to use swans as a topic in your lesson, we have provided you with two activities. You'll find them in the following **Teacher's notes**.

Teacher's notes

Activity 1: Swan upping (level A2 upwards, 10 mins)

- On the board write *Thames*. Ask students where the river flows (from Gloucestershire, through Oxford to London and then to the North Sea). Ask students what kind of birds you might see on the Thames. Encourage the word *swan*.
- Explain that at the end of July all the swans on the river Thames are counted by the Royal Swan Marker.
- On the board draw a swan, a cygnet and a feather (use the illustration below for help!) or ask a student who can draw well. Add the arrows and numbers.



- On the board write: *feather, neck, beak, wing, webbed feet, cygnet*.
- Ask students to write the correct words on the illustration.
- Check answers together.

Key: 1 beak, 2 neck, 3 wing, 4 webbed feet, 5 cygnet, 6 feather

- Extension activity A - Animal body parts
If your students enjoy drawing, encourage them to draw other animals and label the body parts.
- Extension activity B - Baby animals
Ask for other animals or birds and their babies (e.g. swan, cygnet).
Key: Example answers: dog, puppy; cat, kitten; pig, piglet; cow, calf; sheep, lamb; horse, foal; goat, kid; hen, chick; duck, duckling; goose, gosling

Activity 2: Swim, swan, swim! (level A1 upwards, 10 mins)

- On the board write *Swim, swan, swim!* Encourage students to say the words together. It's a tongue twister, so it could prove challenging!
- Ask students if they know any other 'sw' words they can add to the sentence (for example, Swiss, sweet, Swindon, Swedish, swallow, swing). Encourage them to use dictionaries if necessary.

Key: Example sentences: Swim, sweet swan, swim! Swim, swan, swim to Swindon! Swim, swan, swim and swing!