

The Whooper Swans of Hyoko

The build-up of the wintering flock of Bewick's Swans *Cygnus columbianus bewickii* at Slimbridge, their decoying in 1964 on to Swan Lake, and the study based on the recognition of individuals by their bill markings have been reported in previous issues of WILDFOWL and is continued in the present issue (pp. 140-143). The story has recently been summarised in a lavishly illustrated booklet (Scott 1970).

By contrast it has been difficult to find out much about a somewhat similar project half a world away, in Japan. In 1967 a Trust Member, Mr. E. H. Gillham, drew our attention to an illustrated article in a Japanese magazine. We wrote to our friend and contact Dr. Yoshimaro Yamashina, who had visited Slimbridge the previous year. He confirmed that there was indeed a place in Japan to which Whooper Swans *Cygnus c. cygnus* had been attracted by protection and feeding. He passed on our request (translated) for further information and, perhaps, an article in WILDFOWL. He feared, however, that the people concerned were not much given to writing, and in this he was correct, for we heard no more.

Meanwhile a summary translation of an article by Yamagiwa (1955) had been run to earth. Then, recently, the World Wildlife Fund headquarters at Morges, Switzerland, were sent some magnificent photographs by Honda (1969) and a popular article by Lesser (1970), with the request that publication to a wider interested audience should be arranged. We are very pleased to provide the medium and the following article has been compiled from these sources. A selection of the photographs are at Plates VI and VII.

Hyoko lies on the outskirts of the small town of Suibara, not far from Niigata City, on the west coast of Japan's main island, Honshu—opposite the smaller island of Sado (where the Japanese Crested Ibis teeters on the brink of extinction). Hyoko (ko = lake), about 20 acres in area, is a rectangular, three-hundred year old reservoir for the rice paddies which surround it on three sides. A thin row of cherry trees is the only screening. The fourth side abuts on to the houses and gardens of Suibara. There is thus hardly any protection from disturbance, yet a remarkable flock of swans has been persuaded to winter there.

Swans had formerly been abundant in the region but had almost been extirpated from Japan before being protected in

1925. Since then their numbers have slowly increased although there was much poaching during the war and post-war years. Whoopers reappeared at Suibara for the first time in January 1950 when eight visited the lake, increasing to 47 before migrating north. A local farmer, Jusabura Yoshikawa, fell under the spell of the swan's beauty and thereafter dedicated all his efforts to protecting and encouraging them at Hyoko. In 1952 shooting was prohibited on the lake; in 1954 it was declared a Natural Monument, later a National Monument.

In the first years the wintering flock barely maintained its numbers, 27 in 1951, 34 in 1952, 49 in 1953, 33 in 1954, only 15 in 1955. Jusabura Yoshikawa persisted in his efforts, guarding the birds closely, especially when the lake froze and boys or dogs could reach them; diverting a stream into the lake and breaking ice to maintain some open water, and feeding the birds so that they came to know and trust him. His neighbours considered him a swan-obsessed nuisance when he begged them not to hang out washing by the lakeside, lest the birds were frightened. He bullied the town authorities to remove heaps of stones from the roadside, because children used them as ammunition to throw at the swans. Gradually his enthusiasm communicated itself to others, and particularly to his son, Shigeo. But not to his wife, who blames his death at the age of 64 to a complete indifference to his own welfare where that of his swans was concerned. He didn't care whether he ate or not; would stand for hours in deep snow, contemplating his swans, and rush out in his nightgown to drive off poachers. On Christmas Day 1959, although seriously ill, he insisted on going out to tend a sick swan. On returning to the fireside he collapsed and died, murmuring 'one swan more is better . . . feed the swans'.

In previous winters the swans had arrived in January, but in 1959 they came weeks earlier than usual thus affording Jusabura one last sight of them before he died. That season, also for the first time, the numbers soared into the hundreds. By 1967 there were 687 and in 1970 over a thousand. They come earlier and stay later than did the first nucleus of birds, and the 'season' now stretches from November to April.

Shigeo Yoshikawa has, like his father, dedicated his life to the swans. Likewise, he ignores hardship, sallying forth in the

falling snow, breaking the ice on the lake, to feed his birds. His father had insisted that to understand swans you must become a swan yourself. Together they tasted all the aquatic plants that swans eat. Finding that these had a bitter-sweet taste they introduced tea-grounds (used for cattle feed) into a mixture of unripened rice, wheat, soya beans, bread crumbs and greens. Certainly the swans appear to relish the mixture and will fly to Shigeo when he calls 'Koi, Koi' (come, come) even though he may not be at the usual feeding site. This is in front of the low wooden hut, partly built out over the water and heated by an ancient and fuming stove, which serves as an observatory.

Shigeo can recognise individual swans by their bill markings and by their voice, though it is not clear how many of his thousand guests are thus distinguished. Certainly the few Whoopers that have appeared at Slimbridge have proved much more difficult to differentiate than the hundreds of Bewick's. Incidentally, the 'mirror-image' relationship between Hyoko and Slimbridge is completed by their being a few Hakucho—Bewick's (of the Eastern *jankowskii* race)—among the hundreds of Ohakucho—Whooper Swans (Plate VII).

People from all over Japan send Shigeo swans that have suffered accidents. He now has a regular 'hospital' where they can be treated, coaxed back to health with vitamins, or operated on, if necessary, by the local surgeon, Dr. Saburo Iida.

The fame of Hyoko is spreading in Japan. Thousands of human visitors have now come to see the swans. Gift-packages of swan food arrive from friends all over the country, addressed simply to 'The Suibara Swans'. The neighbours are now proud of their Swan Lake and the school children help to clear up litter and patrol the lake shore to prevent disturbance. In March 1970 a 'Society for the Conservation of Wild Swans at Hyoko' was established. The local prefectural government plans a Refuge of some 50 acres and has entrusted the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology with preparing a design.

The Yoshikawas, father and son, have done a wonderful job, not only in providing sanctuary for some lovely birds, but in spreading an interest and love of wildlife amongst their hitherto mainly uninterested compatriots. We look forward to a closer co-operation between the two Swan Lakes.

References

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