



## ORNITHOLOGICALLY SPEAKING...

There are two species of swans that reside on the Avon River. The white swans are called Mute swans, but they are far from silent. Snorts, hisses, honks, and barks are part of the vocabulary of these elegant creatures.

Mute swans are indigenous to Great Britain and Eurasia. If you look carefully, you will see some Mutes have black legs while others have beige legs. The black-legged swans are "Royal" swans and their ancestry originates in Great Britain. The beige-legged swans are called "Polish" swans and they originated in Eurasia.

Breeding Mute swans are naturally very aggressive and will drive out native bird populations from waterways. This is why Mute swans must be pinioned to prevent them from flying off and forming feral flocks.

Pinioning, which removes a little nub of tissue that would eventually form the primary flight feathers, is done within the first ten days of life. By removing the ability to grow flight feathers on one wing, this renders the bird unable to achieve significant altitude in flight. However, when a good breeze blows up the barrel of the Avon, it is not unusual to see a swan fly just above the water's surface.

The black swans seen on the Avon river are aptly named Black swans. They are native to Australia. Black swans are even more vocal than Mute swans and communicate through melodious, high-pitched honks. Like the Mute swan, Black swans are aggressive and their introduction to an area must be carefully monitored.

Every swan on the Avon is micro-chipped and wears a leg band bearing an identification number that is registered with Environment Canada.

Black swans nest twice a year and their young hatch light in colour, similar to the mute cygnets.



## FAQ'S FAQ'S FAQ'S FAQ'S

### How do you identify males from females?

Overall, the male is usually larger than the female. The neck is thicker, the black knob on the bill is larger and more pronounced, and the body weight is heavier. During the breeding season, the male's bill is bright orange while the female's bill is duller and more yellowish. Males tend to be more aggressive and are the ones battling over territory.

### Where do they go in winter?

From November to March the river is frozen and the swans are kept in Winter Quarters which is located behind the William Allman Arena. While swans are well-insulated and don't mind the cold, Winter Quarters protects their food against the elements and guarantees an open supply of water.

### Who takes care of the swans?

The swans are owned by the City of Stratford and are cared for by the Community Services Department, which oversees the park areas. Throughout the decades, individuals have voluntarily played important roles in caring for the swans. However, the most notable and longest running volunteer was Robert J. Miller. It's been through his expert knowledge and years of volunteer service that the Stratford swans have enjoyed the best of care.

The Stratford Waterfowl and Nature Society (S.W.A.N.S.) is a group of volunteers dedicated to helping the waterfowl along the river through public education and awareness campaigns. Members of the group often walk the river and are trained observers in swan behaviours. They report regularly to the Community Services Department.

## SWAN FACTS...

- ◆ A male is called a cob
- ◆ A female is called a pen
- ◆ A baby is called a cygnet
- ◆ A group is called a herd
- ◆ They can live about 25 years
- ◆ Each bird has around 25,000 feathers that require frequent preening
- ◆ Swans' bills are serrated and function like combs in the preening process.
- ◆ "Royal" cygnets retain darker colouring for two years while "Polish" cygnets go white the first year.



## BEHAVIOURAL NOTES...

### More Bluff than Blows

From April to June, battles between breeding cobs is common along the river. As each pair tries to establish and maintain territory, the borders will shift depending upon who's more aggressive at the moment and whose young hatches first. When the cygnets hatch in early June, the border wars will become more fierce as the pairs try to expand territory to provide a buffer for their young. It is important to keep an eye on behaviours during this period to prevent any serious problems. This is why we limit the number of breeding pairs along the Avon.

### Not a Broken Leg!

Swans frequently will extend one leg out beyond their tails and fan the foot toward the sun. This position looks awkward and is easily mistaken as a broken leg. It is believed they do this to help kill bacteria and other organisms that grow on the webbing.

### The Art of Romance

Swans love to flirt! During the spring and early summer, romance can be seen all along the Avon river. Both breeding pairs and 'dating' non-breeders enjoy these lovely rituals. While slowly circling each other, the male and female alternately dunk their heads in the water and blow bubbles. If you see this behaviour there is a high probability the couple will mate shortly afterwards. They will also face each other and move their heads side to side in a synchronous pattern.

### Where Are They Looking?

Due to the position of their eyes, swans see more to the sides of their heads rather than in front. If you want to know what a swan is looking at, generally it's perpendicular to the direction its head is pointing.

## Stratford's Annual Swan Parade

PRESENTED BY

*The Stratford Civic Beautification and Environmental Awareness Committee*

On the Sunday closest to the end of March and the beginning of April, Stratford's swans enjoy the limelight as thousands of people come to witness their 'migration' back to the Avon river. Led by the Perth County Pipe Band, the birds march (well, waddle) down to the river. The parade starts at 2pm, but arrive by 1:30 in order to get a good spot along the parade route. Contact Stratford Tourism Alliance each Spring for the exact date. [www.welcometostratford.com](http://www.welcometostratford.com)



## HELP PROTECT THE SWANS...

### Swan Emergencies

◆ If you see a swan in need of help, call the City at **519-271-0250 ext 243** during weekday business hours. If the office is closed, call **519-271-0820** or **519-271-4143**.

### Feeding...

◆ Swans are vegetarian, so please feed them dark, leafy greens like romaine lettuce, dandelion leaves, or even grass from along the embankment. Dried, whole corn is also good for adult swans and is available at the Tourism Information Centre on York Street and other local retailers. Please do not feed them bread. Mouldy bread can cause a deadly infection of the throat. Swans also do not have the proper enzymes to digest bread and it can cause serious nutritional problems in the cygnets.



◆ Some swans will eat out of your hand, but because their forward vision is not great at close range, this can result in unintentional nips. But since swans don't have teeth, a good pinch is all you will get. If you keep your fingers together and your hand fairly flat, this allows the birds a better view of the corn's location.

### Cygnets...

◆ Those cute little fuzzy things are hard to resist, but never touch, please. The cob and pen are very protective and will attack if they feel their young are in any danger. Their powerful wings are capable of breaking bones. Also, if the cygnets are in the nest, venturing too close may cause the pen to stamp her feet in warning, resulting in some squashed cygnets.

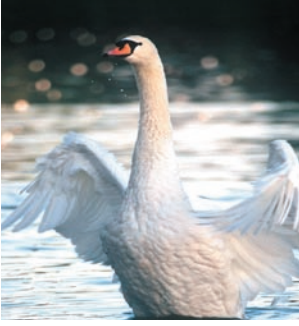
### Stress and Hazards...

◆ Dogs and swans are natural enemies and by law, dogs must be leashed and kept well back from wildlife at all times. During the nesting period, a barking dog too close to a nest will cause tremendous stress on the birds.

◆ Please make sure children don't try to touch or chase any of the wildlife along the river. While many of the birds will feed from your hand, they don't like to be petted or held.

◆ When fishing, please don't use barbed hooks or lead sinkers. Make sure you reel-in if ANY waterfowl approach. The birds may try to eat the bait and will end up getting hooked. Lead sinkers are lethal if swallowed.

◆ Almost every year, swans are killed by cars around the river. They often graze near the road and it's not uncommon for birds to chase each other, resulting in unexpected moves into traffic. Swans also don't look both ways when crossing. Please obey the speed limit and watch out for all life along the river. *Thank you!*







## SWANS ON VIDEO AND IN LITERATURE...

The feature-length documentary **SWANS ON THE AVON** takes viewers on a journey through a one-year cycle along the river with the swans. It is a blend of powerful stories and fascinating information that provides an intimate look into their world. This documentary features Robert J. Miller, Stratford's Honorary Keeper of the Swans, and reveals the important role he played for over forty years.

Robert J. Miller's book, **The Swans of Stratford**, is an excellent and entertaining resource for anyone who wants to learn more about these birds and their history along the Avon river. Mr. Miller's knowledge of swans is unsurpassed and his love of swans is quite evident in each and every chapter.

**SWANS ON THE AVON** and **THE SWANS OF STRATFORD** are available in stores around town

For more information, contact  
**Stratford Tourism Alliance**  
[www.welcometostratford.com](http://www.welcometostratford.com)  
1-800-561-SWAN (7926)



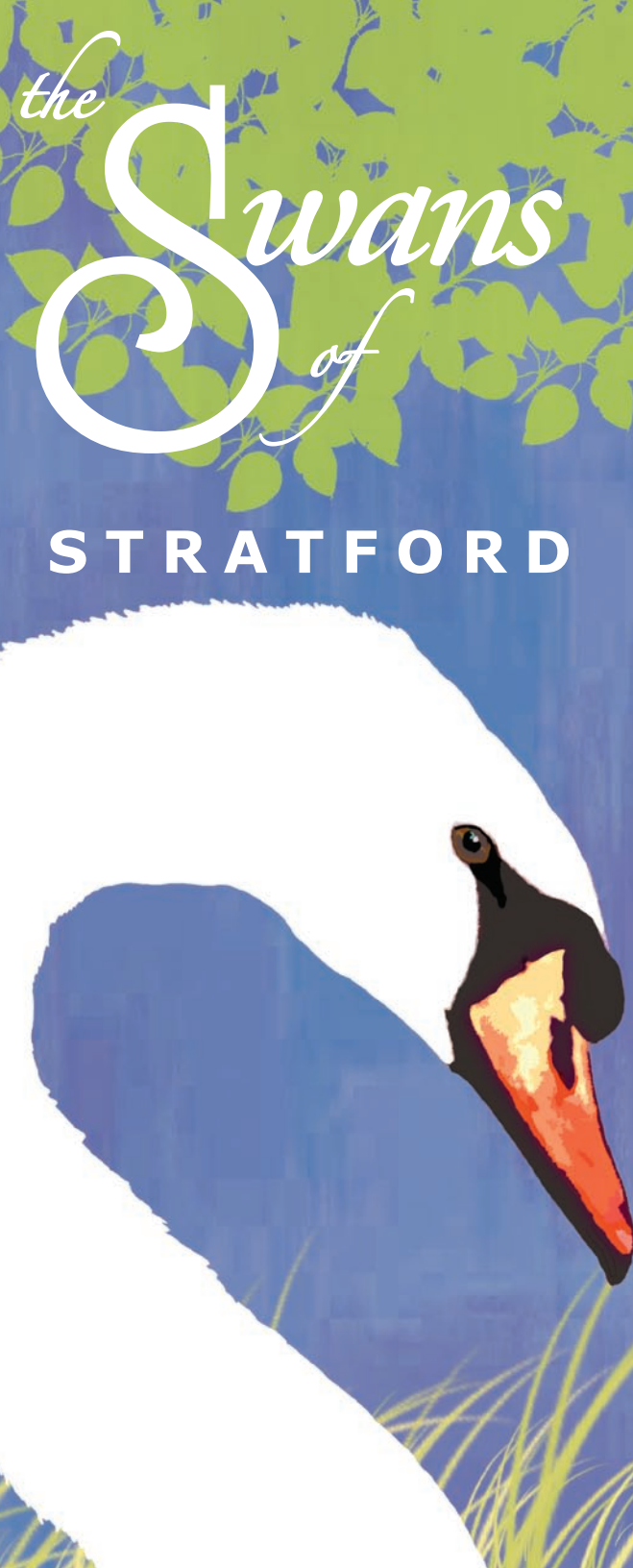
THIS BROCHURE WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY  
THE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS FROM...



STRATFORD TOURISM ALLIANCE



All illustrations ©2007 Kaaryn Gough



# the Swans of STRATFORD

## A Bit of History

On August 23, 1918, a pair of Mute swans was released onto the Avon River in Stratford. They were a gift to the city from Mr. J. C. Garden.

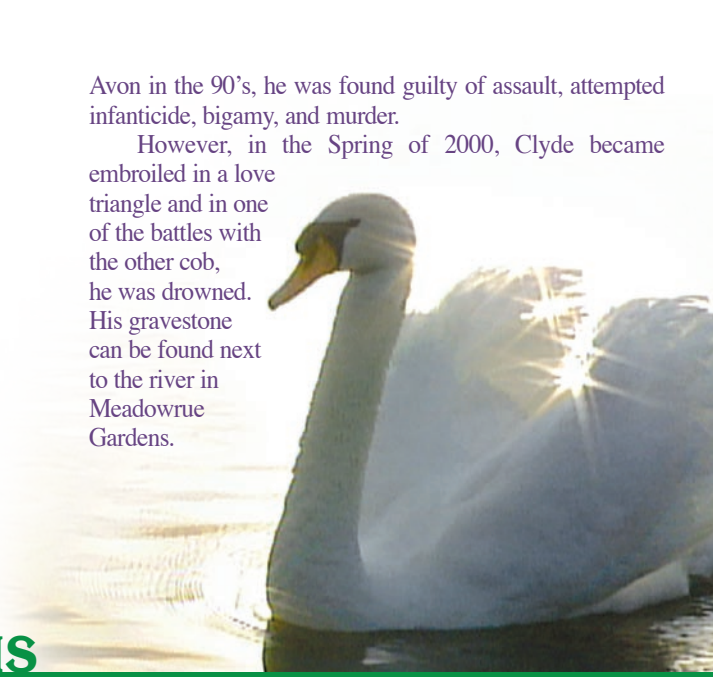
The population of Mute swans has grown considerably since 1918. Over the years, swans from other bloodlines have been introduced and the resulting offspring have firmly established Stratford's herd as healthy and diverse.

Several of the swans on the river today are descendants of Queen Elizabeth II's royal herd. In 1967, Her Majesty gave six pairs of Mute swans to Ottawa in honour of Canada's Centennial anniversary. Subsequently, one of the pairs was then given to Stratford. The female lived more than 20 years on the Avon and had several mates and numerous offspring.

One of those offspring, a cob named Clyde, became quite famous around the world. In his ten-year reign on the

Avon in the 90's, he was found guilty of assault, attempted infanticide, bigamy, and murder.

However, in the Spring of 2000, Clyde became embroiled in a love triangle and in one of the battles with the other cob, he was drowned. His gravestone can be found next to the river in Meadowrue Gardens.



## KEEPER OF THE SWANS

Although Clyde was a regular source of trouble for Robert, he was, nonetheless, one of Robert's favourites.



**Robert J. Miller**  
May 10, 1916 ~ February 6, 2007

For almost fifty years, Mr. Robert J. Miller volunteered his time and expertise to the efforts of caring for Stratford's swans. His title, Honorary Keeper of the Swans, was bestowed upon him in 1984 in recognition of his tremendous contribution. Much of what Robert did over the years has set the standards for the care of Stratford's swans and these standards have been adopted by other municipalities and license holders across North America.

Observation is key in safe-guarding these birds. Several times a day, Robert went to the river to keep an eye on various situations. From April through July, territorial battles between breeding cobs are quite common and have, on occasion, proven deadly. Robert broke up many battles over the years and in some cases, relocated a breeding pair to prevent fatalities.

### "In Nature's infinite book of secrecy, A little I can read"

During hatching in late May/early June, Robert carefully monitored each nest and observed the cygnets' progress and development. Almost every year he had to move snapping turtles to below the dam to prevent them from wiping out a brood.

To keep siblings from mating with each other, Robert supervised the 'dating scene'. His detailed knowledge of each bird's lineage, history, and personality was extremely helpful when deciding which birds would be sold or traded to other licence holders.

Injuries and illness are not uncommon around the river when it comes to the swans and throughout the decades, Robert attended to a multitude of medical situations. Whether it was extracting a swallowed fish hook or treating a swan for lead poisoning, he approached each situation with a gentle determination to provide the best care for every bird.

Robert's dedication to the wildlife along the Avon has inspired many people to take an active interest in the birds. His work sparked the production of the documentary film **Swans on the Avon** in 1999. His book, **The Swans of Stratford**, continues to educate and delight readers of all ages.

Robert Miller's dedication to the swans of Stratford has provided an enduring legacy that will live on for generations to come.