



FEBRUARY

Swan's white plumage seen on water with ice and/or snow around reminds us that 2 of our 3 native species of swan are here for the winter then migrate north to breed. whooper swans breed in Iceland and across sub-arctic areas of Europe and Asia, while Bewick swans generally breed even further north in Europe and arctic Russia.

Traditionally our British winter population of the larger whooper has had a more northern distribution, while the Bewick has been more southerly, however Slimbridge and the Ouse Washes have over the years seen greater numbers of these magnificent birds.

Our knowledge of both these species of bird's greatly improved when it was possible to readily recognise individuals, and that we largely owe to the work of BNA's former Vice-president Sir Peter Scott and the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust (formerly Wildfowl Trust) that he founded. At his home at Slimbridge Peter drew the precise patterns of yellow and black on individual Bewick swans for the first time on the 11th February 1964. That February there were only 23 Bewicks on the Severn Estuary visiting Peter's studio pond. Over the next 20 years numbers built to around 600 visiting.



Whooper swans

Sir Peter extended his identification scheme to include whoopers who also can be individually identified by their particular pattern of yellow & black on their bills.

However my favourite place to watch the spectacle of large numbers of both whoopers and Bewicks, (as well as our more common mute swans, and wintering flocks of pochard and other duck), is without doubt at Welney on the Ouse Washes. The Wildfowl Trust obtained land there and built a bird observatory that faces a lagoon. The large glass windowed-hide gives a fantastic and close view of the birds, which are drawn particularly close by an

amount of grain fed by the warden. It gives a great opportunity to see their methods of feeding, swans dipping their necks down and upending, while pochard dive down through the water.

Historically old Fenland was home to astronomical numbers of wildfowl, but drainage began in earnest under the Duke of Bedford's patronage by the Dutch engineer *Cornelius Vermuyden* to cut the straight route to the sea of the Old Bedford River, and then later the New Bedford River. These run parallel for 20 miles, just one mile apart, and it is the land between is wash-land that takes the winter floods and which makes the present day Ouse Washes of such benefit to the swans & ducks.

To be there in the day is always a fantastic experience, but to be there at night during the floodlit period is even more amazing. The large pure white birds on the ice and water appear more brilliant yet ethereal. At dusk many whoopers fly in to land on the water or ice from where they have fed on crops in local fields.

Bewicks are named after the 18th century British Bird illustrator Thomas Bewick. Of our two wintering swans, the Bewick can be told from the whooper, in that the Bewick is smaller, and has proportionately a shorter neck.