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A wildlife encounter told in light-hearted style



Swan-Upping

You simply don't expect to take an evening stroll on your Local Patch and find yourself embroiled in a life and death struggle, do you? But this evening, that is exactly what happened.

The Mute Swan flock that lives on the Shire Field and on the flood plain beyond has a pretty cosy existence. They have water, shelter, lots of grazing, and hardly any territorial swan neighbours with whom to dispute and spat. But lying between their feeding areas and The Lake, where they roost, is a large and imposing pylon helping to deliver high wires across the countryside. Over the years I have seen a number of big corpses beneath this 30m tall giant, leaving a sorry mess of feathers and a windfall for the scavengers. But I never expected to witness a clash myself.

However, this evening a small herd of swans took off and began their imperious, if short commuting flight. Swans fly with such regal grace that when they do come to grief it can be almost comical, rather like seeing an immaculately presented ice-skater crash down with splayed feet at the end of a triple-axle. One swan among the flock must simply not have seen the wires, or tried to inch between the gap between the upper and lower set. Either way its wing caught the edge of a wire, all its momentum dissipated and it plunged down towards the ground.

It did not, however, hit the flat ground, but instead appeared to crash into the very deepest part of The Thicket. To be honest, the fall looked pretty bad. When they hit wires, swans usually break a wing or two. This swan had first hit wires, and then clattered into some quite unforgiving bushes.

What to do? I was in a dilemma at first. The initial option was to carry on watching and counting the birds on The Lake as if nothing had happened. This line of least resistance would spare me the agony of finding a bloody corpse, but could potentially also sentence the Swan to a lingering, helpless death from starvation or from its injuries. Furthermore, with so many people about on this mild April evening, the official site undertakers, the local foxes, would not be along this way for a while to put an end to the suffering.

Of course, there was only one reasonable thing to do, and that was to see what had actually happened, so I wandered over to the crash site and peered into the vegetation. The Mute Swan is one of Britain's largest birds, it can weigh 15kg and it is pure white. But a Swan in a Thicket turned out to be a needle in a haystack. It was a good ten minutes of scrabbling about in serious, prickly undergrowth before I found myself at last face to face with the bird, and by then, I estimated, we were both in equal need of hospital treatment.

The bird, it transpired, had survived the fall, for up close I could see that its eyes were open, and as I approached the swan made a few cursory wriggles. It had ended up a metre or so above the ground, completely entangled in a small elder surrounded by hawthorns. One of its wings was caught on a branch, holding it open, while the other wing was held half-open at the same height. The swan was so stuck that it could have been a fly in a spider's web.

It was at this moment that I was forced to acknowledge that my ability to help the swan was not very much greater than the bird's itself. The sheer density of vegetation meant that I was almost pinned to the ground and could barely stand up. I had also foolishly failed to visit the Patch armed with all the equipment needed for a swan rescue. I had failed to bring gloves to protect me from bird, brambles and thorns; I had failed to bring a tarpaulin bag or some such that could be used to carry the swan if I could prise it from its predicament. I had brought a telescope on a tripod but, aside from poking the unfortunate bird, it seemed unlikely that this would help much. Most carelessly of all, I had not brought a mobile phone to give a call to the professional Swan Rescuers. Since the light was fading and the situation was dire, at least for the swan, I decided to throw caution to the wind and try to rescue the swan myself.

As you know, however, swans are not well known for their passive nature. There are swans in Oxford that routinely attack rowers, to such an extent indeed that assailants have been the subject of council meetings and hysterical press. There are swans everywhere that hiss fearsomely at anyone who passes. There are also swans that have been known to menace cyclists, too – so they are not all bad. However, anybody who knows the temperament of Mute Swans would be a fool not to hesitate at the prospect of touching them, let alone trying to extricate them from a metre up an elder bush.

It was, therefore, hard to tell who was the most nervous as I gradually inched my way towards the swan. Interestingly, though, the bird hardly reacted at first. It was pinned tightly into its prison of branches, so it wasn't kicking about and struggling, but to my surprise it didn't even summon a hiss as I edged towards it clumsily and noisily. Perhaps young swans – for this was probably a bird under three years old as a member of its non-breeding flock – just don't hiss? Or perhaps this bird was so weak and traumatised that it didn't have the resolve to express displeasure?

My first fear was that the swan's wing, or even both wings, might be broken. My second fear was that there would be a nasty gash somewhere and lots of blood. Indeed both scenarios were likely. Call me squeamish if you like, but the idea of being covered by any animal's blood really doesn't appeal much, which suggests that I would have made a pretty poor Cro-Magnon. And I didn't like the idea of returning home looking more like a pathologist (or should that be a psychopath?) than a birdwatcher, to the inevitable alarm of my wife. But in fact, from one side at least, there was no hint of blood. All those feathers – and a swan, famously, has 25,000 of them – had obviously kept it from the barbs and spikes.

My second fear was allayed when the swan suddenly decided to make a run, or at least a flap, for it. Clearly terror had given it an adrenaline boost, and it managed to wriggle so hard that it dislodged itself after all. Ten minutes had passed since it had made contact with the power-lines, and now this swan finally got down to earth. Extraordinarily, both wings were neatly folded to its side, instead of hanging limply down, and it became obvious that it had had a miraculous escape.



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→ Its redemption, however, was not yet complete. The swan was healthy and could walk and presumably fly, but it was still completely trapped. It was cowering under the thick undergrowth, and its way to the safety of The Lake was barred by a barbed wire fence; it was one of those really unpleasant, antisocial fences, too, which was no more than a metre tall but had the barbed stuff right at the top, ready for some misplaced genitals. The bushes grew right up to the edge, leaving very little room to climb through: a member of the Patch's fairy population might find it a squeeze. The swan could no more take off and fly over this fence than a jumbo jet could manoeuvre from a helipad.

Thus the rescue was about to become personal; there was nothing for it than to pick up the swan and lift it over the fence. It was at this moment that the entire human population, which had been swarming around the Lake a few minutes before on a hundred evening strolls, simply melted away, leaving the place deserted, when a couple of extra hands might have been helpful. And where is a fisherman on that single, once-in-a-lifetime moment when you might actually need one? Having come this far, the swan and I needed to see the end of the affair.

The truth is that any spectators would have found the next little act in the drama hilarious. That is because the swan was no longer stunned and had come to its senses, understandably concluding that an impending embrace from human hands was not to its taste. It began to waddle up and down the fence, in the opposite direction to my waddle, so that several times I made a grab and ended with nothing but dirt in the face. My heart was pounding, and I was beginning to panic in case the swan now managed to injure or even kill itself, which would have been a sorry end indeed. However, if the truth be told, a fall from a power line does not lead to a swan feeling at its razor-sharp best, and on my third or fourth attempt I finally managed to get a decent hold on the beast.

I have never read a swan-handler's manual, but common sense would dictate that leaving the neck free when you are carrying one of these birds is possibly not an element of best practice. I fully expected to be nipped, or at least struck by the swan's bill. But remarkably, once embraced, the swan once again went into its shell, and didn't even protest as I edged it up towards those dangerous wires. What impeded our progress, however, was the swan's extraordinary weight. I knew swans were heavy, but being aware that a swan can weigh 15kg and actually lifting that bulk are two different things. Forcing the swan over the fence and away would be an athletic feat equivalent to tossing a caber at the Highland Games. By now, however, both of us had been injected with a dose of steel, and with a heave and a flap we managed to keep the swan's body and feet away from the dreaded wires. The white beauty flopped with a crash on to the path, steadied itself and ran-flapped its way towards the shore of The Lakes. Once there it gave itself a good shake and floated regally in the direction of its bemused colleagues.

It was only then, of course, that a small party of evening strollers hove into view. They gave me a sideways glance as I lurked behind the fence, face, trousers and fleece caked in mud, tripod leaning crazily against the barbed wire, and with a few white ashes from the swan's explosive escape still blowing around my head.

"Evening," they said cautiously.

"I've just rescued a swan," I said.

They didn't reply. The swan just floated around with its colleagues without ceremony. Order returned to the Patch.

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