

## CONSERVATORS OF THE RIVER CAM

### MATTERS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY – RELOCATION OF AGGRESSIVE SWAN

#### 5.1 Background

Conservators will be aware of a dangerous interaction between a male mute swan and river users on the Cam over the last two summers. The swan has been named 'Mr Asbo' by locals because of his aggressive behaviourS against boaters, rowers and canoeists, including running at boats and pecking rowers on the arm. He has attracted TV and newspaper interest. This behaviour particularly occurs at nesting time and when rearing his brood (March to August).

It has been reported that the swan has been adopted by a boater, Mr Middleton. Conservators have had supported the River Manager in her efforts to address his attitude to the navigation and other river users. Mr Middleton has allegedly been feeding this swan family dried cat food and stimulating the cob's behaviour.

It is clear that the situation last year took 3-4 months of intense management by the River Manager, and concerns from all parties involved, including the boating community, local residents and Councillors.

At the time when the situation was becoming very intense, the River Manager asked Conservators for support an application to relocate the pair of swans for H&S reasons under licence from Natural England (Minutes, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2010). As the swan was in brood, Conservators took the decision to defer the NE licence application and to continue assessing the situation through the summer period.

It was clear that the swan remained aggressive to water users through the summer.

During the winter period, the swan was attacked by a dog and received treatment for its injuries.

#### 5.2 Situation for 2011

It is foreseeable that with the behaviours being exhibited, there are two possible outcomes that may occur:

- there will be a serious injury to a canoeist or rower from an attack, possibly with serious consequences such as a drowning.
- in taking self defence action, the bird might be hit by a paddle or blade, and be injured or killed.

Conservators need to consider this foreseeability again for this year. There is the potential for more attacks and their consequences. Neither outcome should be acceptable to the Conservancy in its duty to manage the navigation safely.

### 5.3 Views from stakeholders and experts

The rowing community has expressed that the swan's behaviour remains a considerable concern to daily rowing activities, but this is heightened during events such as the May Bumps, where special precautions were put in place last year. This made the event almost impossible to run.

Opinions and views have been sought from conservation bodies, focusing on whether the swan can be 'rehabilitated', contained or whether relocating the swan is the most effective option (responses annexed).

Kevin Peberdy, of the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, commented '*On balance, we would support the relocation of this pair, possibly followed by fencing or barrier erection (such as a "dead hedge") that would make this particular site less attractive to breeding Mute Swans*'. Mr Peberdy also raised concerns about the health of cygnets from swans that were fed with pet food.

Jeff Kew, of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, advised that '*We recognise there is an issue of public safety, so providing a NE licence is obtained the RSPB will not object to suitable relocation*'.

Alex Nichols of Natural England, the authority which licences bird relocation, advised that '*With respect to whether the birds behaviour would be reversed with time, our Senior Ornithologist suggests that it is possible that with time, the individual would become habituated to the presence of people on the river and no longer perceive them as a threat (though this is perhaps unlikely if people are hitting it with oars in self defence)*'. '

Significantly, Mr Nichols continues that '*We also believe that the excessive feeding of the swan is contributing to the problem and think that if another swan was fed in this way, it too could develop similar aggressive behaviour. All efforts should be taken to end the practice of feeding these birds. If the person(s) involved cannot be persuaded to stop, then the local authority could consider imposing local bye-law banning feeding*'.

*'Natural England remains ready and willing to provide further advice and to consider any application to relocate the swan(s), should that be the preferred solution.'*

### 5.4 Proposed way forward

In 2010, the River Manager spent considerable time managing a highly reactive situation for over 3 months, following the Conservators initial direction. The ability of the River manager and river users to prevent incidents occurring is very low.

We need to make a decision now to set a process going to reduce the risks of 'conflict' ahead of the breeding season.

We are aware that we can re-initiate this application to NE to relocate the breeding pair and cygnet. This action may not be supported by all parties. However, the Conservators need to balance the risks to the birds and our duty of care to wildlife, the river users to whom we also owe a duty of care, and the impact this has on the safe management of our waterway. Our focus here needs to be the welfare of the birds and the safety public who use the river, nothing more.

Opinions of experts have been canvassed. It is highly unlikely that the bird's behaviour can be reversed in the short term, no other interventions are thought to be effective (such as penning) and future aggressive interactions between the bird and people and their animals, are foreseeable.

The only practicable solution is for the birds to be relocated under licence from Natural England.

## **5.5 Recommendation**

**Conservators are requested to consider the option to re-activate the licence application with Natural England to relocate the breeding pair ahead of their breeding season.**

February 2011

River Manager

## ANNEX

Body	Date	Comments
Broads Authority (Trudi Wakelin, Waterways Manager)	7.10.11	'We have carried out some work on waterfowl disturbance, particularly overwintering populations, and as a result have introduced voluntary refuge areas, where boaters are asked not to venture during specific periods. However, these are all in open water bodies where this is possible – as you identify not sure you can manage it that easily in a linear feature, although I recall BW implementing zoning in one of their SSSI canals by buoying off a marginal area to protect delicate water plants – so subject to the width of the affected stretch and the nature of the vessels this may be something you could consider.'
Chelmsford Canoe Club	20.01.11	<p data-bbox="600 584 2065 651">'... though other swan/s have moved in we are not currently being chased down the river by them in January as we have been in previous years.'</p> <p data-bbox="600 692 2065 759"><u>Author's note:</u> the Canoe Club's application to relocate aggressive mute swan 'Hissing Sid' was approved by NE in 2010 and the breeding pair were successfully relocated</p>
Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (Kevin Peberdy, Director of Centre Developments)	8.02.11	<p data-bbox="600 770 1644 799">'This is a difficult issue which I have now discussed with some of my colleagues.</p> <p data-bbox="600 807 2065 946">'As with all territorial swans it is actually unlikely that they would cause serious injury (although this does remain a possibility) – but the perceived threat from the bird remains a major issue here. It is unlikely that an aggressive male will reduce its territorial behavior and posturing over time – although this tends to only be a severe problem during the breeding season and the suggested provocation will certainly heighten the behaviour.</p> <p data-bbox="600 954 2065 1058">'Clearly the swans need to be separated during the breeding season to prevent risk of injury to users (either actual or as a result of perceived threat) and to the birds. Our animal health team also point out the feeding of dry cat food to swan will cause health issues, particularly in cygnets.</p> <p data-bbox="600 1066 2065 1169">'It may be possible to make the particular nest location difficult to access for the birds prior to the breeding season through fencing or other barriers. However this may encourage breeding elsewhere and thus move the issue to another location. The use of barriers may not be possible or acceptable (and they are prone to vandalism).</p> <p data-bbox="600 1177 2065 1313">'In some cases it has been possible to erect an enclosure around the birds during the breeding season but this is rarely feasible or manageable and would be difficult on a river. It may be possible to remove the pair during the early breeding season and allow them to breed in a captive situation elsewhere with the family released back to the Cam in the Autumn – but this would require a lot of resources and would need to be repeated annually, even</p>

		<p>assuming a suitable facility is available to undertake the work.</p> <p>‘The other solution is the relocation of the birds under NE licence to another suitable site (which would need to be assessed and absence of other breeding pairs confirmed) before the breeding season. However, depending on the location of this, it is possible birds will return and it is certainly feasible that a second pair will take up the empty territory relatively quickly which may or may not have a similarly aggressive male.</p> <p>‘On balance, we would support the relocation of this pair, possibly followed by fencing or barrier erection (such as a ”dead hedge”) that would make this particular site less attractive to breeding Mute Swans. NE Wildlife Management Advisers will be able to help.’</p>
Natural England (Alex Nichols, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Team Leader)	10.02.11	<p>‘The problems being caused by this swan are clearly serious and from the Natural England perspective, we are able to issue a licence to relocate the swan(s), however we would need a suitable receptor site to be found for them, and appropriately experienced people to carry out the relocation. From discussions with the Cam Conservators regarding the options and licensing process last year, we understood that they intended to wait until after the breeding season before making any decisions as to whether to move the swan, with a view to potentially moving the bird before the next breeding season, however we have not heard from them since, for this reason the case is ‘open’ but on hold, until the Conservators decide what they wish to do. We are also aware that Her Majesty’s Swan Marker did not object to the relocation of the pair of swans, and advised it would be easier if done outside the breeding season.</p> <p>‘With respect to whether the birds behaviour would be reversed with time, our Senior Ornithologist suggests that it is possible that with time, the individual would become habituated to the presence of people on the river and no longer perceive them as a threat (though this is perhaps unlikely if people are hitting it with oars in self defence). We also believe that the excessive feeding of the swan is contributing to the problem and think that if another swan was fed in this way, it too could develop similar aggressive behaviour. All efforts should be taken to end the practice of feeding these birds. If the person(s) involved cannot be persuaded to stop, then the local authority could consider imposing local bye-law banning feeding.</p> <p>‘Natural England remains ready and willing to provide further advice and to consider any application to relocate the swan(s), should that be the preferred solution.’</p>
RSPB (Jeff Kew,	14.02.11	<p>‘We recognise there is an issue of public safety, so providing a NE licence is obtained the RSPB will not object to suitable relocation.’</p>