

Asterism: Swan Creature Corner

Introduction

Jordan: Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to Starry Time.

Kit: Asterisms edition.

Jordan: Where stars plus lines equal stories

Kit: with an asterisk.

Jordan: In these episodes, we will explore ideas, concepts, or people that didn't make it into the main show, or just things that we might want to talk about a little bit more. In this episode, we're going to be giving you a creature corner on swans.

Creature Corner: Swans

Before I get into my swan facts and my deep ornithological research, Kit, can you just tell me, what do you already know about swans?

Kit: So, aside from the fact that I'm afraid of them, which we've discussed. One of the wonderful things that Mom has given me in the raising of me, um, I know, actually, a few things about swans. I know, of course, that they're birds.

Jordan: Yep.

Kit: I know they can fly. I know that they live in a lot of different places. I know that there are different species. I know one of them is called the Mute swan. BoP actually told me that Mute swans are invasive to North America. So I know that, which is sort of cheating because BoP told me it. I know they lay eggs. I believe they mate for life. But I don't know if that's, like, a real true fact about them or if that's the sort of mythological belief about swans. Probably the most important thing that I know is that swans have been implicated in the drowning deaths of people on boats that they've attacked. And so they are elegant killers, but killers, uh, nonetheless.

Jordan: Quote: "A grown man was attacked and killed by swans while in a kayak near their nest. Inside Edition April 23, 2012. Inside Edition spoke to the devastated family of 37 year old Tony Hensley, who was killed by the creatures that have come to symbolize peace and tranquility. As Hensley's brother said, they're very big and very beautiful animals."

Kit: Mhm.

Jordan: "They're very large and very protective." So, yes, Kit, you are absolutely right. We do have at least one record of death by swan, which is easily searchable on the Internet. But okay, you are right about quite a few things here. Swans do lay eggs. Swans have been found around the world. A lot of swans do mate for life and they can

fly. The swan species weighs up to 33 pounds and can have a wingspan of about 10ft. As you said, there are a few different species of swans. There are Mute swans, Whooper swans, Black Neck swans, Tundra swans, Black swans, and of course, Trumpeter swans. They all fall under the same waterfowl family and they share a common ancestor with ducks and geese.

Kit: That makes sense.

Jordan: Makes sense. They all came from the same common ancestor. And as you said, swans have a huge geographical range. They occupy both temperate and subarctic regions. They are found in North America, Europe, and the Black Swan as far away as New Zealand. So they are highly adapted to a variety of habitats, depending on the species. Some of these swans have been recorded to be able to live 20 plus years. The longest recorded in nature is 24 years. There are stories that some swans in captivity have been able to live up to 50 years.

Kit: Yeesh!

Jordan: But, yes, these are animals that have been with us for a long time.

Kit: It does make sense, like, considering just how widespread geographically they are, that we have so many stories about swans. You know, not just the Cygnus myth, but, you know, lots of other swan stories and that are sort of out there. That's interesting. That's probably why.

Jordan: We have one of these tropes called the swan maiden, which is about either a lover who can transform from swan form back into human form. So, like, as long as

anyone has been able, as any culture has been able to see swans, there has been some admiration, or at least appreciation of their elegance. Localized, perhaps most extremely, and in the past 1000 years

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Jordan: in Great Britain, because in the 12th century, there was a law that granted ownership of all swans in open waters to the British Queen. [laughter] And this is a law past in the 12th century that is still in effect to this day.

Kit: Wow, all swans.

Jordan: Britain's monarch,

Kit: uh-huh.

Jordan: Has the right to claim any Mute swan which are the native species found in Britain. [Kit laughing] Only three companies in the UK are legally allowed to own swans. They are the Abbotsbury Swanery, the Vinter's Company, and the Dyer's Company. But if you're not one of a member of those three companies, you are not legally allowed to own swans for the past millennia [Kit: Wow] in the United Kingdom. Not only that, Kit, but it was high treason to even be seen killing a swan in Britain. And that outlandish interpretation of the law was only changed in 1998. So definitely can't own swan. But even threatening swans was outlawed. So this is a law that lasted well up into the modern day.

Kit: Wow.

Jordan: Another interesting thing we can talk about with swans as a species is the fact that Europeans, like those in Britain, obviously, have been talking about Black swans since at least the first century AD. You can read all sorts of Greek, Roman philosophers using the Black swan as, uh, a figure of speech for something impossible. And it wasn't until the 18 hundreds, when people from Europe began colonizing other parts of the world, that they found that Black swans are actually quite common mainly [Kit laughing] in southern regions of Australia, there's a widespread population. But no, this one thing that was taken as an axiom, lasted for 1800 years. I have one last fact for you here, which is something that you also did mention. Swans typically choose their partner around four years old and remain loyal to them throughout their entire life. In order for this to happen, male swans perform intricate courtship rituals during the breeding season, such as synchronized swimming and mirroring of their prospective lover's movements. The swans' water dance is known as billing, and it can be seen as a conversation between the two swans and a declaration of shared interest. And after their distinctive billing dance, prelude to a long lasting bond between the two swans, they start to build their nest. This shared nest is over a meter in diameter, and in this nest, the pen, which is a name for a female swan, lays the egg while the male swan, also known as a cob, gathers materials. And if a partner dies, the remaining swan undergoes a mourning period, which may last for years.

Kit: Aw

Jordan: But guess what? We're not done yet. Cause not all swan couples are female male couples.

Kit: Mm hmm.

Jordan: In fact, we found quite a few examples of lifelong pair bonded male male couples who will raise an egg together that was donated by a female.

Kit: Oh my gosh.

Jordan: Can you imagine that?

Kit: I mean, it seems like the Romans could imagine. I mean, right? We have Cygnus and his lover, uh, Phaethion, Phaethon whatever his name was, which I've already forgotten again.

Jordan: We've also seen examples, like in the Victoria Zoo in Canada, where 3D printed eggs were given to a male bonded couple, and they did their best to insulate them. And one of the volunteers at the sanctuary said, quote, "eggs aren't necessarily about just making babies. They're actually part of the behaviors in these birds. So although the team placed fake eggs in Billy and Elliot's nest, the pair showed a lot of interest in them. The nurturing behavior, whether or not they're gifted an actual egg or not, is still there."

Kit: I did not know that about swans. That's really interesting. It does make me like

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Kit: like them more, but it doesn't make me less afraid of them.

Jordan: They do have this wonderful contrast of being extremely scary. Um, terrifying. I mean, a ten foot wingspan. No, thank you.

Kit: It's a big bird. It's a very big bird. There are big birds. Right? Like secretary birds. Right? Like, there are big birds that exist, but like, that, you don't see every day when you live, like, in the US. But swans are birds you can, like, reasonably expect to see most places, and they're enormous.

Jordan: I think this is one of the times where you knew most of the facts already, and I was just happy to help shade them in a little bit more.

Kit: Yeah, I'm surprised that I knew as much about swans as I did. But, you know, it's very important to understand the enemy and to, you know, be fully aware of their capabilities. [laughter] Uh, so you can avoid getting anywhere close to their nest and just, um, avoid them in the water in general.

Jordan: Kit, now that you will have nightmares, regardless of all the positive things that I've said here today, I think it's probably time to wrap it up here in creature corner.

[music]

Outro

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: And we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time. [Music]

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