

Almost All Swans Of England Are Owned By The Sovereign

When you see a swan in a pond who might owns it? The British Royal monarch owns most of the swans in the country. After the death of Queen Elizabeth II the new British monarch, King Charles III, inherited the swans that the monarch has right to.

Owning The Swans

Does the King literally own all these swans? Technically, no. He doesn't own them but has a right, passed down through the centuries, to claim them, making him the de facto owner.

At one point in time swans were treated as a rare delicacy particularly by the royalty. Commoners were not allowed to own swans and noblemen, with sufficient land and income, would have to ask the monarch for permission to take them. As a result a black market developed and swan theft became a major problem. In fact special courts were created dedicated to swan disputes.



It's still unclear when the monarchy started to own the swans of the country but in the 1500s Queen Elizabeth I wanted to round up swans for an occasion. However some people claimed that they owned them. The matter was taken to Court who sided with the Queen, ruling that she had the right to unmarked swans, along with 'royal fish', a classification that included sturgeons, whales and porpoises.

Since then eating swans fell out of style. By the 18th century nobody ate swan and they became protected wild birds. In 1981 eating them was made illegal.



Who Else In Britain Is Allowed To Own Swans?

You may ask whether the royal right applies to all the swans in the country. The answer is no. It applies to only mute swans (one of several species of swans found in Britain) in open waters which aren't already owned by one of three companies permitted to own swans: The Abbotsbury Swannery, The Worshipful Company Of Vintners (since 1189) and The Worshipful Company Of Dyers.

Marking Ownership

Swans used to be marked with knives and brands on their beaks to indicate ownership but nowadays they are fitted with rings to designate ownership.

Upping

Every July David Barber, who has served the royalty for nearly 30 years as the swan marker, leads the royal Swan Upping on the Thames: a five-day expedition on six traditional rowing skiffs to collect data and assess the health of swans. Wearing a red jacket and a large swan feather in his cap, he would circle the swan families, lift them out of the water, weigh them, check them for injuries and fit them with tracking rings.

Adapted from an article by: Deepika Lal, Hindustan Times, Oct 2022