

Swan Eggs and Cygnets

by

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Topsham, Devon May 17, 1999 A life and death drama of nature is taking place literally outside our kitchen window before our very eyes. Some two and a half weeks ago, a pair of mute swans nested in the marsh grass of the Exe estuary just two or three metres from our house wall between us and Topsham town quay. The female has laid seven enormous eggs, and not surprisingly, she and her consort are very proud of them. But the problem is, she failed to consult the tide tables when building her nest. The Exe estuary here is quite broad, and very tidal -- on the bottom of the tide, only a narrow ribbon of water is left in the winding channel, while huge banks of glistening mud are revealed. But on the flood, and especially on fortnightly spring tides, all is covered as the waters rise a full four metres in height.

Thus, some two weeks ago, just days after laying her eggs, an evening spring tide saw the swan's nest completely submerged, the swan still attempting to sit on it all the same, while frantically adding new bits of wood and twigs to try and build it up. Once the waters had receded, she then worked like a swan possessed, hauling over sticks, straw, grass, wood, anything at all, working, building all night long. The nest rose in height considerably, and on the next morning's tide, when the high waters came in again, it actually floated, and the eggs took only a mild soaking. But the worry was, had the temperature of the chilly, late spring waters been sufficiently low to kill the embryos? No less an authority than the Royal Swan Uppery was consulted, but his pronouncement was

not definitive: "the eggs may be able to survive an occasional dousing" was the verdict.

That set of spring tides came and went, and in the intervening fortnight, the swan continued to build up her nest, higher and higher so that now she perches on a volcano-like mound that, when the tide is low, looks absurdly himalayan. And the eggs: they glisten in the sun, enormous pale grey ovoids with shells that look as thick as dinosaur's.

No eggs ever laid could ever could have been so pampered or looked after more solicitously than these swan eggs: most of the time the female sits on them, turning them regularly, leaving them out to bask in the warm sun when there is any. Occasionally her consort will sit on them, if ordered to do so, while she has a rare outing into the estuary to stretch her legs and wings. A big crow often pecks around nearby, but the merest ruffle from the male sends him flying. A river rat has been spotted in the vicinity by a hawk-eyed neighbour, who promptly called the local rat catcher to ensure that said rodent didn't pilfer the eggs. The swans have been fed from our garden with pain au levain and walnut ciabatta. Another set of high spring tides has come, and though the eggs were submerged again last evening, she is sitting on the nest even as I write this, high and dry and looking mighty pleased with herself.

Such effort, such drama, such heroics for the sake of her precious eggs.

Meanwhile, this oviferous drama has coincided with an incessant and fascinating group correspondence on the Guild of Food Writer's e-mail discussion list about eggs: there has been talk of omelettes stuffed with confiture des fraises, tunny, and baked beans (though not all at once); there has been khagineh -- Persian eggs fried in sugar; notes have been offered on penguin eggs, plover eggs, quail eggs, fulmar eggs (from St. Kilda), ostrich eggs, gull eggs, pheasant eggs, partridge eggs, turtle eggs,

even powdered eggs; caviare and salted trout eggs have featured; eggs rubbed lovingly in olive oil and Turkish coffee and eggs left for a hundred days (or so) until black and green; and we've even been treated to the tale of how Marie de Medici was saved by eggs smuggled in by the proverbial curate (did she eat them raw? I imagine she must have done). What a marvellous, versatile and anecdotal food: the egg.

The point, then, of this little story? I fear there is none. A neighbour brought us over a goose egg some weeks ago, laid by a farmyard goose she keeps as a pet: it made a delicious, rather rich omelette, still runny inside, the yolk strikingly bright yellow in colour. It was probably about the same size as our swan's eggs, perhaps marginally smaller and I cooked and despatched it without a second's hesitation. Yet now the mere passing thought of eating a swan's egg fills me with complete and utter disgust. It raises questions about both cultural and personal food taboos and rational and irrational food phobias (and makes me thankful that I live on the river and not beside a field of frolicking, adorable, delicious spring lambs). Lily-livered? Yes, please, with sage and fried onions.

Stop Press 9/6/99 For some days now our dear swan has seemed rather agitated, would hardly leave the nest, and has spent a great deal of time turning the seven eggs by bending her long, elegant neck underneath them and moving them around with her beak. The gestation period, according to the books, is 36 days, and by our reckoning we are now well into the 40s, so we've rather feared the worst: that her heroic efforts could be all in vain. During this time, we've been having some work done on the house by a couple of Devon builders who come up from Torbay each morning, and they too have taken a keen interest in the swan and her potential progeny. They are quite a double act, these builders: Tony, the

main man, who is in his mid-50s, and John, older and smaller, his sidekick and labourer.

The other morning I was out in the garden with them. They were waiting for a skip to be delivered.

"Skip's here," shouted Tony.

"What!" said John, jumping up and spilling his tea, then rushing to the wall to peer over into the river.

"Skip!" bellowed Tony again.

"Oh," said John sheepishly, "I thought he said 'chicks'".

They have also added to our egg lore by describing how, as boys after the war and throughout the years of rationing, they would go out on to the cliffs of Berry Head above Brixham to filch gull's eggs.

"Time's were hard, and my mum would send me out to fetch them for tea. Very yellow yolks, and a salty taste, but they were lovely, and especially good for cakes."

"If the eggs don't hatch," added John, "we'll have to break them up for her, else she'll sit on them all season. If we breaks 'em, she'll lay again."

Well, we didn't really fancy this prospect, but things were not looking good...

Imagine the delight, then, this morning when John bellowed up to me in my office beside the house, "Marc, quick, swan!" They had been throwing the swan some lardy cake (apparently she had turned her nose up at bread and butter sawnies) and this was deemed worth getting off the nest for: as she waddled into the mud and reeds to fetch the cake, a little grey cygnet head popped out of the nest, chirped loudly, and looked around! The swan quickly returned to the nest and with not very lady-like ado, adjusted herself on the eggs once more, and actually sat down square on the little cygnet, which promptly (and hopefully not too painfully)

disappeared from sight again. We hope the next time she appears, it may be with a brother or sister...

Stop Stop Press 11/6/99 There are now three cygnets -- puffy, grey, hardly awake little creatures which spend most of their time underneath the wings of their mother, who still sits imperiously and determinedly on her now immense nest, waiting in hope for the remaining four eggs to hatch (though my bird expert friend tells me this is now 'highly unlikely' since eggs normally all hatch within 24-36 hours of the first). No matter: three is a family by any reckoning, and this morning the cygnets, only a day or two old, together with Ma and Pa ventured out on their first outing. It almost ended in terrible disaster. As the tide dropped to reveal the banks of glistening Exe mud, the tiny creatures rolled and tumbled out of the nest (literally), then followed their parents down the sloping bank to the water's edge for a first swim. They were delightful, floating like puffy, weightless corks rather than swimming, and our little Bella fed them some bits of baguette before going to school. I meanwhile went upstairs to work.

An hour or so ago the builder called urgently up to me: "Marc, come quick. Trouble." Apparently, one of the cygnets, while trying to waddle back up the bank to the safety of the nest, had become stuck, breast down, in the deep, oozing estuary mud. It lay splayed out chirping pathetically, flapping its not yet fully formed wings and its tiny webbed feet in vain. Yet it was no more than three metres from the nest where the mother sat together with the two remaining cygnets, apparently deaf to the cries of her baby. The father meanwhile seemed willing but pathetically inept and hopeless (no comments please, I'm just reporting it as I saw it), completely and utterly unable to act. It had waddled down to near the baby but just sat there in seeming bewilderment, looking at the struggling creature, but doing nothing.

Clearly something had to be done. But what, that was the question? Those swans, we knew from experience, can be fiercely aggressive, especially when protecting their young. But the struggling creature would soon die from overexertion and fear if nothing was done, and we could not bear to stand by and witness that. So I put a ladder over the wall and went down to see what I could do. The male swan immediately flared its wings and hissed loudly as I approached and the mother got off her nest, spread her wings and hissed even more ferociously (rather like the dilophosaurus in Jurassic Park who hissed similarly then flared its splendid collar before spitting poisonous venom into the face of the odious Nedry). Perhaps it was not quite so dramatic as that, but two adult swans in anger are not to be trifled with lightly I can assure you. So the builder came down into the mud to help me distract them. Using pieces of driftwood to hold off the hissing and furious adults, we managed to put a canoe paddle under the little fledgling to free it from the powerful suction of the mud. It rose unsteadily to its feet, bedraggled and completely caked in the heavy mud, tried to walk, then tumbled backwards again, back down, stuck in the mud. We had to repeat the operation all over again, and lift it up the slope on the paddle, from whence it stumbled unsteadily and rather punch-drunkenly back into the nest (again tumbling backwards a couple of times as it struggled up that himalayan eyrie -- as it reached the summit, the mother finally helped it back up, and it promptly and with no doubt a huge sigh of relief, disappeared once more under her warm and protective wing).

If anyone has ever read the delightful children's book *Make Way for Ducklings*, you will understand that I felt rather like Clancy, the Boston policeman, who stops the traffic on Boylston Ave in order for the ducklings to cross the road safely en route to the Common. Exhausted, worried, a nervous wreck...

16/6/99 We've seen little of our swans and the three cygnets in the past few days. Perhaps when they have been around, we haven't been in the garden. Certainly, they have already begun to roam far and wide, incredible considering they are only a week old: on Sunday, when we went downriver for the day, we saw them on a muddy bank off of Ting Tong (all the bends and mudbanks of the Exe have lovely, timeless names -- for example, an immense and featureless bank we often run aground on is poetically called Greenland).

Last night was a gorgeous evening, the river full to the brim on an exceptional 4.2 metre spring tide. For one last time, it seemed, the swan's nest was to undergo its ordeal by water, the remaining three eggs bobbing forlornly, abandoned. Indeed, the nest, without the constant attention and reparations of the mother, was beginning to deteriorate and break up rapidly. Quite sad, really. We looked out one more time before going to bed: it was dark but to our astonishment, the swan had returned, was sitting absurdly once more on the floating nest, the cygnets scrambling around, fighting and struggling to get under her wings. Did she still hold out hope for the eggs? Or had they simply returned to a comfortable and safe abode for the evening?

This morning they were all gone again, and one of the eggs, in the receding waters, must have tumbled out of the nest, which itself is now considerably flattened. Later, on walking Bella to school, we saw them all, underneath St. Margaret's Church, basking on the old stone promenade that juts out into the river by where the salmon fishermen keep their small boats. Another family was feeding them.

"Hello swans," said Bella, "bye bye swans."