

While this description touches upon some of the more productive spots in the Westport-Dartmouth area, it is by no means exhaustive. Its objective is to stimulate the interest of potential visitors, so that they may discover for themselves why this region is one of the truly unique birding districts in eastern Massachusetts.

#### MUTE SWANS

Wayne Hanley, Massachusetts Audubon Society

On a recent railroad trip along the Connecticut shore, we noted at least two swans on every stream headed into Long Island Sound.

When we returned to the office, we received a note from a correspondent in South Yarmouth who mentioned that Mute Swans "seem to be turning up more and more frequently on the Bass River and small ponds."

Indeed, Mute Swans are turning up more frequently. If we all live long enough, we'll probably see them wintering along the Maine coast.

The Mute Swan is the huge white swan one sees as it sails sedately across the pond on many New England town commons. It is a European bird which was brought to America as poultry. Supposedly domesticated, the Mute Swan became an ornament on the ponds of the wealthy who summered on Long Island, New York.

When E. H. Forbush wrote a review of the birds of New England in 1925, the only swans he mentioned were the Whistling Swan, which breeds in the Arctic and occasionally becomes lost and wanders above New England on the way to Chesapeake Bay, and the Trumpeter Swan, a western bird that rarely has appeared in New England and for many years was an endangered species. He also noted that a Whooper Swan of Europe reputedly had been shot in Washington County, Maine, in 1903, but that he could find no trace of the specimen.

Forbush was spared the mention of a Mute Swan, for there was none wild in New England at that time.

In 1955, Ludlow Griscom could refer accurately to the Mute Swan as a "rare vagrant" in Massachusetts. He commented that the birds occasionally flew into the Commonwealth from an active colony in Little Compton, R.I.

Although Mute Swans had bred for several years in Connecticut, the first recorded nesting in the wild in Rhode Island was reported from Briggs Marsh in Little Compton in 1948. It was the nucleus of the active colony Griscom referred to. By 1965, the wild swan population in Rhode Island had risen to 416 birds.

At the moment, it is doubtful that anyone has accurate figures on the wild Mute Swan population in New England. It is known, for instance, that at least 300 birds now live on Martha's Vineyard. When an ice sheet covers the east branch of the Westport River in Westport, there must be at least 300 wild swans feeding at the leading edge of the ice. As the correspondent noted, there are wild swans on the Bass River. And the birds abound in Rhode Island and Connecticut wherever salt water keeps river shallows open.

So far as anyone knows, the New England population arose from domesticated Mute Swans that escaped from Long Island estates. There is a good possibility, however, that some of the birds escaped from captive flocks held by New Englanders. For instance, at Durham, N.H., there is a pair of Mute Swans that produces a few young. To date, none seems to have survived the gosling stage.

Mute Swans lay two to eleven eggs and if the nest survives raccoon raids or some game warden tiptoeing out to destroy it, the young still must grow fast enough and large enough to escape snapping turtles. Once Mute Swans mature, they can take care of themselves--and very well, too.