

2023

Waterbird Colour-marking Group Iceland Whooper Swan



The new study begins

The Iceland Whooper Swan has been intensively studied through a long-term life history study undertaken by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) in collaboration with Sverrir Thorstensen, Ólafur Einarsson, the Icelandic Institute for Natural History (IINH) and the Irish Whooper Swan Study Group. The study commenced in 1989 which saw several thousand birds captured and ringed both on the breeding/summering grounds in Iceland and also at wintering sites in Britain and Ireland. In 2021 the WWT announced its termination in the involvement of the study to prioritise work effort in other areas of wetland conservation. This, twinned with a reduction in catching effort in Iceland, Britain and Ireland in recent years, has seen fewer colour-marked Whooper Swans in the population.

In an attempt to bolster the numbers colour-marked and to continue collecting data to contribute to the demographic monitoring of the population, the Waterbird Colour-marking Group have teamed up with Sverrir Thorstensen to continue catching and colour-marking birds in Iceland. The group's activities sees targeted catch effort taking place at non-breeding moulting flocks in northern Iceland along with catching family groups consisting of breeding pairs and their cygnets.

August 2023 saw the first fieldwork expedition of the new colour-marking study with Kane Brides, Scott Petrek and Stephen Vickers travelling to Iceland to work with Sverrir Thorstensen. The below details daily accounts of catching effort along with daily and overall capture and ringing totals.

Sverrir Thorstensen, Kane Brides, Scott Petrek and Stephen Vickers.

Thank you!

Many thanks go to the following people for their assistance in helping to make this trip a success – Aever Petersen, Magnús Ingi Óskarsson, Ketill Þór Thorstensen, Ólafur Einarsson, Eypór Ingi Jónsson, Snævarr Örn Georgsson, Auður Erna Pétursdóttir, Georg Ólafur Tryggvasson, Unnur Pétursdóttir, Magnús Magnússon and all the farmers and landowners who permit access to their lakes.

The study in numbers

The number of newly colour-marked birds added to the study in summer 2023.



413



Part of the catching team at Miklavatn

The catching locations

Catches took place across northern Iceland in Fljótshéiði, Mývatnsheiði, Kelduhverfi and Skagafjörður, with the team visiting 12 sites to colour-mark Whooper Swans. Other moulting flocks in the area were also noted along with the breeding success of pairs being documented.



Bjargavatn

To kickstart the expedition's activities we headed back to Bjargavatn where we undertook a catch back in 2022. Most of the birds captured in 2022 were metal ringed only (not given colour-rings) so with the new colour-marking scheme, we wanted to attempt to recatch some of these birds for colour-marking. On arrival it appeared that fewer birds had chosen to moult there, however a flock of 25 non-breeding adult Whooper Swans were caught resulting in 23 new birds and only 2 recaptures.

05/08/2023

23

new birds

2

recaptures

Kálfborgarárvatn & Kálfatjörn

Catching started at Kálfborgarárvatn to undertake a catch of non-breeding moulting birds and also three family groups. Two family groups were initially caught, one with a brood of three cygnets and another with seven, however the third brood could not be re-located. We then turned our attention to the non-breeding adults with 22 caught, which included two birds already carrying metal rings only (colour-rings added), 10 recaptures (already carrying colour rings) and 10 new birds. On returning from Kálfborgarárvatn, we called off at Kálfatjörn and caught the breeding pair and their three cygnets (all newly ringed).

06/08/2023

25

new birds

16

recaptures



Brunnvatn & Sigurðarstaðatjörn

A quieter day with fewer lakes visited, mainly due to the duration needed to get to these two lakes. Breeding looked to have failed on Brunnvatn with no cygnets located, though two adult recaptures were caught. Later at Sigurðarstaðatjörn two broods of two cygnets were caught, including the brood of a Whooper carrying a British (BTO) metal ring and an orange darvic XJR - this bird having been ringed at WWT Martin Mere, Lancashire in 2017.

07/08/2023

4

new birds

4

recaptures

1

controls





Skjálftavatn

An early start to travel 2 hours from Akureyri to Skjálftavatn which is not far from Husavik and holds 11 breeding pairs of Whooper Swan and their cygnets and a flock of 25-30 non-breeding moulting birds. We concentrated on catching the families initially resulting in 28 cygnets caught and 12 breeding birds. A further 20 non-breeding adults and 1 yearling were also caught and ringed.

08/08/2023

61
new birds

Sandvatn

Historically Sandvatn has always been a good catching site, however in recent years the lake has been far too weedy to allow the boat to run on it. This year however sees slightly higher water levels and fewer weedy patches in the lake allowing 110 birds to be caught of which 98 were new birds and 12 recaptures from previous ringing events. One cygnet was captured and ringed.

10/08/2023

98
new birds

12
recapture



Engivatn, Arnarvatn & Kálfatjarnir

We attempted a catch of two broods on Engivatn, however low water levels and weedy conditions made it difficult to catch them. We then relocated to Arnarvatn (on a quad, given the car got stuck!) where we managed to catch an adult and 4 cygnets, the other adult flew. Whilst passing Kálfatjarnir we stopped off to capture another adult and it's three cygnets, again the other adult flew. We eventually managed to retrieve the car with thanks to a farmer and his tractor!!

12/08/2023

7
new birds

2
recaptures

Miklavatn

During the latter end of the trip the team relocated west to Skagafjordur to attempt two days of catching on Miklavatn. It has been sometime since any catching has been attempted on this lake so with all the permissions from the authorities and farmers in place and with some 600 moulting birds on the lake, we successfully caught 101 and 123 birds during the two days consisting of 219 new birds, 3 Icelandic recaptures and 2 British ringed birds also caught.

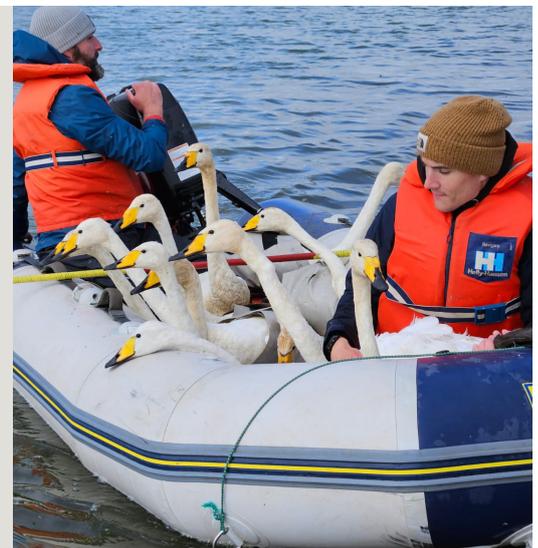
A single bird was caught near farm Brekka.

14 - 16/08/2023

219
new birds

3
recaptures

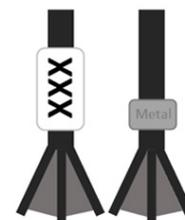
2
controls



New colour marks added to the study

This year a new colour-mark scheme was used for Whooper Swans, white leg rings with three black alpha-numeric or alpha-only characters, in the format of either number, number, letter; or letter, letter, letter.

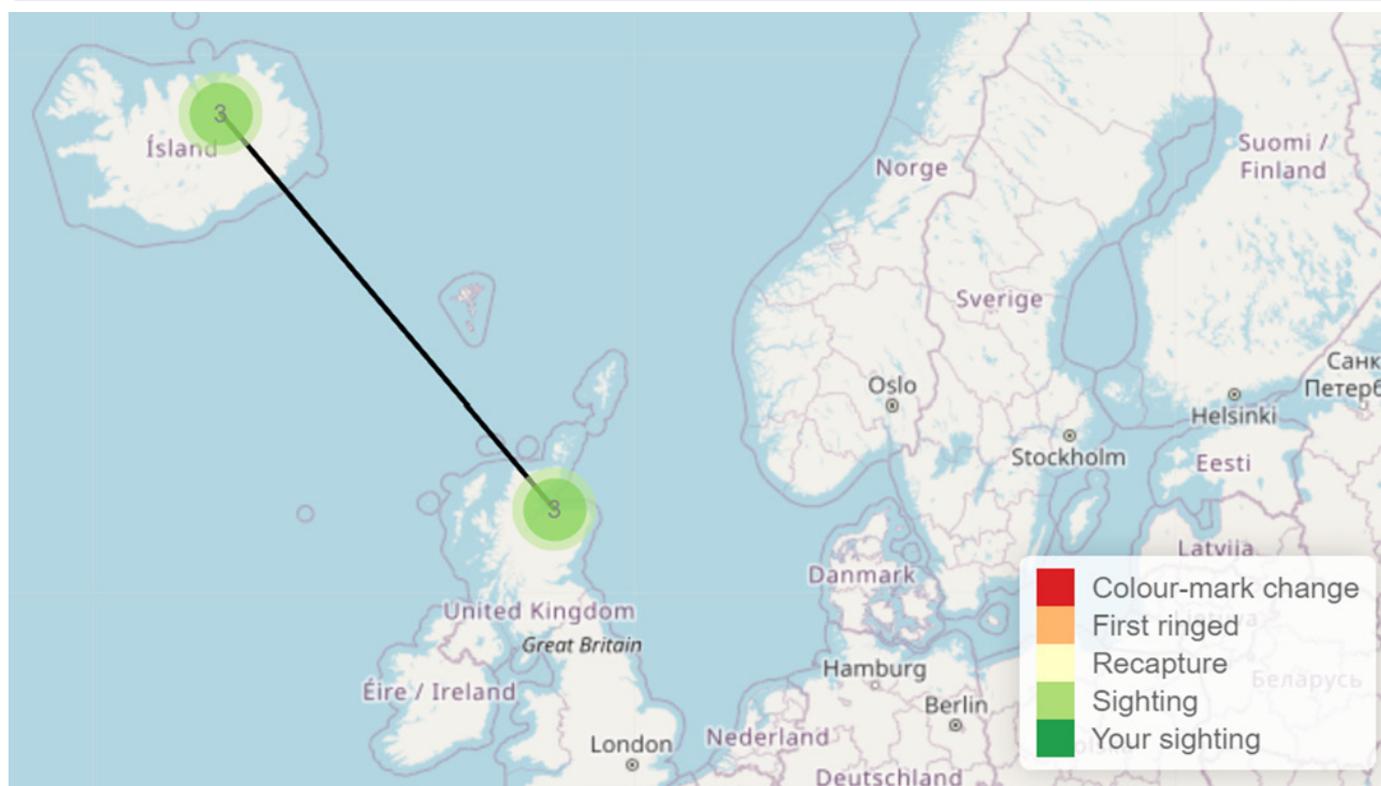
All sightings of white rings can be submitted using our online reporting app, providing an instant life history feedback to the observer. See details below.



Reporting sightings

All sightings of Whooper Swans carrying white rings should be reported directly to waterbirdcolourmarking.org via the report a bird page. On submission to this platform observers will be instantly produced with the life history of each bird reported along with a map of their movements. Birds sighted at the same location on the same date can be reported in a single submission by separating each ring code by a comma i.e., 31A, 37B, 43D

Record type	Species	Darvic	Age	Sex	Date	Location	
33X							
1	First ringed	Whooper Swan	33X	Adult	Male	2009-08-05	Sandvatn, Mývatnsheiði
2	Recapture	Whooper Swan	33X			2013-08-14	Sandvatn, Mývatnsheiði
3	Sighting	Whooper Swan	33X			2016-03-15	Ardivot
4	Sighting	Whooper Swan	33X			2016-03-20	Ardivot
5	Sighting	Whooper Swan	33X			2016-03-27	Ardivot
6	Colour-mark change	Whooper Swan	33X			2023-08-10	Sandvatn, Mývatnsheiði



Birds from previous colour-marking schemes with either yellow, orange or red leg rings are also still seen in the population and should be reported to The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust via email to colourmarkedswans@wwt.org.uk

The final results

Site	Ringing totals				Age totals			Sex totals	
	New	Recapture	Control	Total	Adults	Cygnets	Yearling	Male	Female
Bjargavatn	23	2	-	25	24	-	1	14	11
Brunnvatn	-	2	-	2	2	-	-	1	1
Kálfborgaravatn	20	16	-	36	26	10	-	19	17
Kálfatjörn	5	-	-	5	2	3	-	2	3
Sigurðarstaðatjörn	4	2	1	7	3	4	-	4	3
Skjálftavatn	61	-	-	61	32	28	1	34	27
Sandvatn	98	12	-	110	101	1	8	53	57
Arnarvatn	4	1	-	5	1	4	-	2	3
Kálfatjarnir	3	1	-	4	1	3	-	-	4
Miklavatn	219	3	2	224	187	3	34	135	89
Brekka	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	-
Totals	438	39	3	480	380	56	44	265	215

Site	Totals with biometrics taken *			
	T	S	W	P
Bjargavatn	25	25	25	25
Brunnvatn	2	2	2	2
Kálfborgaravatn	35	36	36	23
Kálfatjörn	5	5	5	2
Sigurðarstaðatjörn	7	7	7	3
Skjálftavatn	61	61	61	46
Sandvatn	110	110	110	107
Arnarvatn	5	5	5	5
Kálfatjarnir	4	4	4	4
Miklavatn	224	224	224	224
Brekka	-	-	-	-
Totals	478	479	479	441

The study in numbers

3630



The total mass in kilograms of Whooper Swans weighed during the trip - over 3.5 tonnes... that's the same as the tongue of a Blue Whale!

* **Biometrics:** T = Tarsus, S = Skull (Total head length), W = Weight, P = 2nd Primary growth

