



Swan lake love-hearts

Terry Brown

VETERINARY voyeurs are to strip bare the secret sex lives of Albert Park's swans.

Every black swan there is being fitted with an "e-tag" to minutely log its love life.

And the three-year, \$220,000 probe is expected to put to bed the notion that swans are faithful.

The Melbourne University study follows recent DNA tests that found one cygnet in six had a surprise father.

A clutch of eggs can have three different dads.

It showed swans to be feathered philanderers, but not how they sneak off for two-timing trysts.

"Swans are such famous and familiar birds, iconic birds in terms of their faithfulness," zoology lecturer Dr Raoul Mulder said. "Birds, like humans, fall a bit short of that idea of lifelong fidelity.

"But how do they manage to do it without the mate finding out?"

To find out themselves, scientific stickybeaks have begun super-gluing transponders to tail feathers.

When females start nests — mating season — they will be fitted with receptors to log every encounter.

The date, time, duration and identity of the consenting parties will register in what researchers believe is the most detailed such study.

"It works exactly like an e-tag system, but in miniature," Dr Mulder said.

"When the birds copulate, the little back pack on the female will register the male."

Despite swans' apparent grace, Dr Mulder described their mating as "messy and inefficient". The female is dunked like a doughnut.

The team began its also-messy job of catching and tagging swans this week.

About half of the estimated population of 150 have now been fitted with tags, weighed and measured.

And the team of seven researchers, headed by Dr Mulder and Prof Mark Elgar, also plans to get inside their genes.

Each bird has a blood sample taken to determine its sex; paternity will be sorted out later.

But it's not a blame game.

"We think both parties are guilty as charged," Dr Mulder said.

"Generally if they're doing it, it must be for some good evolutionary reason.

"It might be to gain superior genes for their offspring."

Or just for fun?

"I think it's unlikely."



But are they faithful? Swans form a heart shape on Albert Park Lake. Picture: DAVID CAIRD