



# Oh, what a let-down

on the  
wing

DON KNOWLER



**I**T appears the swan of ancient legend — the symbol of fidelity and loyalty — might have, if not a dark side one that borders on a shade of blue. For centuries European folklore has been steeped in tales of swan virtue and purity, inspiration for the ballet *Swan Lake* and other works.

Isn't it swans that pair for life and fight to the death to defend mate and offspring? And pine

to death if tragedy befalls one of the pair?

So I used to believe. I've written about it and cited examples but the latest research into the mating habits of Australia's black swans shows there may be a different story.

It seems there are love rats in the nest and infidelity might be rife in the species.

The University of Melbourne's zoology department has been taking a close look at the mating habits of swans in the city's Albert Park Lake and the birds, particularly the females, have every reason to be nervous about their clandestine activities coming to light.

DNA paternity testing done by the researchers has revealed about one baby swan in every six is a love child.

The university's Raoul Mulder said the findings had come as a shock to researchers because male swans were protective of their female companions and usually did not let them stray out of sight.

Now the uni is out to catch them in the act, with researchers using hi-tech tracking devices to monitor the mating goings-on on the lake; the technology will also track the males' philandering.

Dr Mulder said the often secretive mating habits of birds had proved difficult or impossible to monitor in the wild. However, by tagging male swans with a tiny microchip and females with a decoder, researchers could record the birds' most intimate moments.

When a male and female were in the act of mating, the female's decoder unit would detect the microchip implanted in the male's tail

feathers, registering the male's identity as well as the time of copulation, Mulder explained.

The miniature detectors weigh 150 grams and are worn by the females like a small backpack. Tagging of about 150 swans will be completed in a few days, in time for the breeding season in spring. Then all mating events will be logged on to the decoder unit so a complete record of a female's mating behaviour can be downloaded when the swan is recaptured. The results will provide the first

snapshot of a swan's true boudoir behaviour — and could dispel the myth that swans have one lifelong partner.

In an interview with AAP in Melbourne, Mulder said researchers had known for some time that swans were not as monogamous as they were believed to be and paternity testing had proved that already.

The unanswered question is how the females manage to escape the clutches of their partners for an extramarital interlude, and how often.

It's the first time researchers have been able to use the latest technology on any bird species to get a complete record of the females' behaviour.

There are six species of swan in the world — some undertaking marathon migrations between continents — and it will be interesting to compare the Australian research into black swans with other species, which include the second kind seen in city parks in Australia, the mute swan introduced from Europe.

Mulder acknowledges that in mythology swans represent purity and fidelity but it's a perception he is keen to dispel.

As a defender of swan morals to the last, I take Mulder to task, suggesting research into swans' mating behaviour should look beyond Albert Park, on the fringes of St Kilda Rd in Melbourne. Swans in the big smoke, living life in the fast lane, may not be representative of the species.



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