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Sex drive muddies water of swan lake

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SCIENCE REPORTER

MELBOURNE University scientists are prying on the mating habits of Albert Park Lake's swans. It sounds a little creepy, but it's all in the name of sex. Sorry, science.

Swans have a reputation for faithful monogamy. Tagging them has revealed that 95 per cent stay "married".

But at Albert Park Lake, DNA analysis has shown that one in

six baby swans is illegitimate. In other words, cheating is rife.

Now scientists would like to know when, where and how they manage to do this without offending their dearly beloved.

"What is unusual about these findings is that male swans are typically very protective of their female companions," said Raoul Mulder from Melbourne University.

"How then can a female be promiscuous in this relationship? Is she sneaking off in the middle

of the night to meet other birds?"

Male swans are having tiny microchips attached to their tail feathers. Come breeding season next month, the female swans will have an electronic tracking device placed on their backs.

You guessed it. The tracking device recognises when a microchip is being intimately poised in its direction. After breeding season, scientists will remove the tracking device, which has faithfully recorded the recent sexual history of the bird in question.