

LETTER OF THE WEEK

The winner receives a £10 voucher from Haith's.



Single-mindedness at the LCA

I HAVE not bred Lizard canaries for many years, but when I did I always used to colour-feed them. In recent years I have viewed the controversy over whether to colour-feed or not with some concern. Making life tolerable is all about compromise, and the fancy is no different; it was the unwillingness to compromise over colour-feeding that led to a division within the Lizard fancy when what it needed was unity. It has come as a very nice surprise to read your news stories in recent issues telling

how the LCA has led the Lizard fancy back towards unity. It's true what they say, that sometimes the shortest way home is to turn round and retrace your steps.

Last week's item about the revived Lizard "Classic" show and the trial classes for non-colour-fed birds came as very welcome. (*Cage & Aviary Birds*, June 19, page 2.)

I think everybody at the LCA has been single-minded and showed decisiveness to put things on a better footing. **Name and address supplied.**



LCA chairman Jeremy Goacher recently appointed and has overseen decisive progress

IDENTIFYING SWANS

WE READ with interest your report "New swan study: death by mistaken identity" (*Cage & Aviary Birds*, May 29, 2019). It suggested that hunters in Russia and elsewhere may inadvertently be killing legally protected Bewick's swans (*Cygnus columbianus*) because this species is not always readily distinguishable from the whooper swan (*C. cygnus*).

Your report included the comment that "improving the skill of hunters to differentiate between protected and legitimate quarry would be an effective tool for the conservation of similar-looking species" and in this context it was good to read that the "Swan Champion Project" has produced a visual memo to assist hunters.

Differentiating between protected and legitimate quarry is important also to those involved in veterinary diagnostic work and wildlife crime investigations. In April 2006, our friend and colleague, the late, much lamented, wildlife veterinary pathologist Vic Simpson DTVM, MRCVS, Hon FRCVS, published a letter in the *Veterinary Record* entitled "Post mortem identification of swans". He pointed out that there are morphological differences between Bewick's, whooper and

mute (*C. olor*) swans, but these may be masked by changes after a swan has died. Vic explained that the answer to this conundrum was to examine the bird's trachea; it is significantly different in the three swan species.

The letter finished with a message to those who are asked to examine the carcasses or remains of birds as part of a veterinary or forensic investigation and may think that only modern molecular techniques can provide an answer. He wrote: "There is no doubt that DNA testing is a valuable, modern tool but anatomy still has a place – and can give immediate results." To this we would add that careful dissection of a dead bird is also less costly – a vital consideration when funding for diagnostic or forensic investigations is limited. **John & Margaret E. Cooper, Wildlife Health, Forensic and Comparative Pathology Services, Norfolk.**

BIG THANK YOU

PLEASE could I send a big thanks to Ken Lockyer, Steve Dix and Dave Guppy for sending me some great bird badges. They look really good and most of them I didn't already have. Thanks also to *Cage & Aviary Birds* – it was really kind of you for all your help. **Ian Morley, Derbyshire.**

OSPREY WISH



Osprey: proving elusive

ABOUT a month ago, while on a guided walk around the county of Rutland, I heard that the 150th osprey chick had been born to a pair of birds that have been breeding at Rutland Water since 2015.

I was very excited, having recently moved to England's smallest county. Living really close to this huge man-made lake, it's where I frequently walk or take part in the local parkrun. So, surely, one day, I will be lucky enough to see this amazing bird. My neighbour certainly has; he fishes on the lake and recognises he has no chance of beating the resident ospreys in a fishing contest. They are experts and feed almost exclusively on fish with specially adapted talons, including one reversible "toe", that create a super grip to prevent slippery prey getting away.

I, on the other hand, am having to rely on updates of the four chicks on the Rutland ospreys webcam, which is almost as good

as seeing them in real life. Sometimes you fear for their safety as they "helicopter" their wings about the nest but mum, Maya, comes in to land with another stick to build up the walls.

Perhaps I'll just grab my binoculars and go for a mid-afternoon stroll, just in case... **Linda Masters, Rutland.**

BLUETHROAT BLISS

I SAW my first bluethroat (with no star) when I was about five years old and was so fascinated that I never forgot! By the age of eight, I got a good bird book for Christmas and there was one written sentence about the bluethroat living in the wetlands of north Germany, so I guessed the name was real! By the age of 13 I saw the first picture and report from Rupert Claus (Claus Bird Food) and now, seeing this picture on Facebook, I know I had the correct species all along!

Axel Voeltz, via Facebook.



Bluethroat: this is the photo Axel saw online, taken from Thomas Wendt's article on the species in *Cage & Aviary Birds*, June 12 issue. Photo: Thomas Wendt

Editor's Letter

IT WAS WHILE I was away for two weeks recently that the birdkeeping world learned of the passing of Brian Hogg, whose obituary appears on page 22. I'd known about his terminal illness and that he had dispensed with his beloved canaries (what a heart-render that must have been), yet of course the news that he'd gone still came as an awful shock.

As recently as August 22 last year, I congratulated Brian in this column after he'd been voted on to the NCA's Roll of Honour. Reading again what I'd written about him, I realised I'd missed out something essential, namely that balancing his great ability was the quality of deep modesty. Not false modesty, sneakily fishing for compliments: Brian was quite assured of his own talents and status. But he was able to see clearly his place in the big picture alongside that of countless other people. It wasn't his way to push or dominate, but to listen first, think second and then speak. I'm not at all surprised to learn of his strong influence in European birdkeeping circles. We will miss him very badly in that role, as well as others, just at a time when we need his qualities.

Other tributes to Brian will appear next week, and if you'd like

66 If you would like to contribute a tribute to Brian Hogg, simply write

to add your own, even if it's just a line or two, simply write or email. ■ I winced at the story about leaflets in Russian to explain the difference between Bewick's and whooper

swans (May 29 issue and letter, left) and which ones it's legal to shoot. Then in America three weeks ago I saw precisely the same thing. At a reserve in Wyoming, there were both posters and leaflets with illustrations to show how to tell a licence-to-hunt swan from a rigidly protected one. Ironically, the shootable party was the tundra swan (*Cygnus c. columbianus*), a distinct race but the same species as Bewick's, which is illegal to hunt in Russia. It's the larger trumpeter swan (*C. buccinator*) that is a shooters' no-no in the States. Tasteless though I personally found the whole business, I was struck for the first time by the confusability of the two species pairs: Bewick's and whooper closely alike, with yellow-and-black bills, and tundra and trumpeter closely alike, but with all-black bills. Is some sort of evolved mimicry at work here,



whereby (say) the smaller species has developed via some advantage to be easily confusable with the larger? I must read up on it... with birds, the questions never stop coming, do they? Enjoy yours this week.

Rob Innes

Birds

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

51 issues of *Cage & Aviary Birds* are published per annum

UK annual subscription price: £101.49

Europe annual subscription price: £170.00

USA annual subscription price: £170.00

Rest of World annual subscription price: £190.00

CONTACT US

UK subscription and back issue orderline: 01959 543 747

Overseas subscription orderline: 0044 (0) 1959 543 747

Toll free USA subscription orderline: 1-888-777-0275

UK customer service team: 01959 543 747

Customer service email address: subs@kelsey.co.uk

Customer service and subscription postal address: Cage & Aviary Birds Customer Service Team, Kelsey Publishing Ltd, Cudham Tith Barn, Berry's Hill, Cudham, Kent TN16 3AG

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DISTRIBUTION
Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT. www.seymour.co.uk
Tel: 020 7429 4000

PRINTING
Mortons Print, Lincolnshire Tel: 01507 5234564

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