

Pioneering project to safeguard Europe's smallest swan

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Flight of the Swans will be the first ever attempt to follow the migration of the Bewick's swan from the air.

Researchers at the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus are involved in a pioneering project to safeguard Europe's smallest swan, which has won support from Dame Judi Dench, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Pen Hadow and Sir David Attenborough and a swathe of businesses, charities and individuals.

Flight of the Swans will be the first ever attempt to follow the migration of the Bewick's swan from the air. Setting off this September, Sacha Dench of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) will fly a paramotor from the Bewick's swans' breeding grounds in arctic Russia 7,500km across 11 countries before finishing at the swans' final destination in the UK.

The paramotor is simply a wing of fabric, from which Sacha will dangle

with a propeller strapped to her back. Flying at the same speed and height as the [swans](#), she will experience the wonders and dangers the swans face including heavy storms, sea crossings and extreme cold. She will share their view with the world in real time using the latest digital camera technology and satellite communication.

Along the way, Sacha and her support team will meet with the communities that live along the swans' flight path, including reindeer herders, farmers and hunters, and investigate why the number of Bewick's swans in Europe has almost halved in the last twenty years with less than 18,000 now surviving.

A team of researchers from the University of Exeter is studying this decline, and working to reduce activities such as illegal hunting in Russia. Julia Newth works for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and is undertaking her PhD at the University of Exeter's Centre for Ecology and Conservation, based in Penryn in Cornwall.

Julia said: "In these times of rapid environmental change and limited resources, the need to devise imaginative and creative solutions to actively engage people with serious conservation issues and to stimulate action could not be greater. The novelty and ambition of Flight of the Swans will bring together people from very different cultures and backgrounds across a large geographical area to save the Bewick's swan. And for that reason, it will make a real difference."

Dr Ana Nuno, a Research Fellow from the University of Exeter, said: "I am thrilled to be involved in such an exciting initiative raising attention for Bewick's swans. This initiative will be used to share our research findings with people in areas where they can make a real difference to the survival of this incredible species."

Anyone can find out more about the expedition and sign up to support the Bewick's swan at www.flightoftheswans.org
Sacha Dench, who has family links in Chagford, and had her first

experience of flying in the cold in Dartmoor, said: "I'm humbled by the support that Flight of the Swans has already gained. People all across Europe and Russia are using this expedition as a lever to improve things for the swans, which is all I could have hoped for.

"Each winter, I'm fortunate enough that a small flock of a couple of hundred Bewick's swans returns to my workplace – WWT's Slimbridge Wetland Centre in Gloucestershire, UK. To get there they need safe passage all the way from the northernmost wilds of Russia, and for the last two decades fewer and fewer have made it. It's crucial that we act now before it's too late."

Sacha Dench contacted Dame Judi Dench, who plays M in the James Bond films, after a family member found out that they were related. Dame Judi said: "Flight of the Swans is absolutely fascinating, full of adventure and passion. I'm proud to support it. We need to work together if we're to help these beautiful birds, and I am looking forward to following the expedition."

A wide range of organisations is collaborating on the project, and helping to organise events to coincide with Sacha's arrival. These meetings and workshops will help progress swan conservation throughout their range of habitats.

Sir David Attenborough said: "This expedition is marvellously imaginative and adventurous, and a fitting project in WWT's 70th anniversary. Peter Scott did similar in his day and inspired the world. That swans should fly from Russia to come here is surely a kind of parable – we can live in harmony with nature and it's up to us to do so."

Pen Hadow, polar explorer, said: "This feat of human endurance – an individual paramotoring 7,000 km over some remarkably inhospitable terrain and weather conditions - will mirror the gruelling annual

undertaking of the Bewick's as they leave their breeding grounds in the Arctic Tundra and head for wintering spots in the UK and nearby. The direct communication with communities along the route, and massive media coverage on an international scale, will undoubtedly focus attention and efforts on helping to prevent the decrease in the Bewick's swan global population."

Provided by University of Exeter

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