

JACOB RUPPERT AND HIS MUTE SWANS: THE HISTORICAL STATUS OF A NON-NATIVE BIRD IN DUTCHESS COUNTY

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Mute Swans are non-native but now common in Dutchess County and much of the Northeast. Their introduction is generally attributed, at least in part, to a release in Rhinebeck. It has been shown by Teale (2011) that most references to the expansion of Mute Swans in the Northeast originated from *Birds of the New York City Region* by Ludlow Griscom published in 1923. Teale (2011) also refutes the claim in the *Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in NY State* that 216 swans were released at Rhinebeck in 1910. Do facts support the introduction of Mute Swans in Rhinebeck?

Fact: Jacob Ruppert ran a farm and had Mute Swans. Ruppert was born in 1842 in New York City, the son of a beer brewer. He followed in his father's business, becoming very successful. In 1883 he purchased land in Rhinebeck adjacent to Vanderburgh Cove with a commanding view of the Hudson River. The house was in disrepair and was quickly demolished; a new home was built retaining the name Linwood. While he spent much time at this Rhinebeck home, it was really just his summer place as he continued to maintain his winter home on Fifth Ave. near 93rd St. However he also created a successful farm operation at his summer home, breeding horses and running a poultry business which bred both chickens and Pekin ducks, a standard domestic white duck, sold mostly to hotels and restaurants.

Around 1900, maybe earlier, an unknown number of swans were acquired. It has been assumed these were Mute Swans. When the railroad was built along the east shore of the Hudson, an embankment was constructed separating a cove from the river. This small lake was named Vanderburgh Cove, after the family of Dr. Federal Van Der Burgh, who owned land in that area. This became home to the swans and occasionally some ducks. In January 1904 it was noted that passengers riding the railroad to Albany would regularly see the home sitting majestically on the bluff with swans in the cove below ("51 years ago" column, *Millbrook Round Table*, Jan. 27, 1955).

The next reports of swans in Dutchess County are May 1907, when two men shot three of Ruppert's swans and were quickly arrested (*Rhinebeck Gazette*, June 8, 1907), and May 1913 when 32 swans were transferred to Central Park in New York City (*Rhinebeck Gazette*, March 15, 1913 and *New York Press*, March 22, 1913). In both cases, newspapers reported that the swans were owned by Col. Jacob Ruppert, Jr., the bachelor son of the owner of Linwood. Interestingly, after 1919 Ruppert, Jr. kept a private zoo at his Garrison, NY home consisting of "exotic" monkeys, pheasants, peacocks, and parrots, but apparently not including any swans. Ruppert, Sr. died in 1915,

having been ill for some years, leaving his estate to his wife. His will explicitly noted she was to receive the “chickens, ducks, [and] live stock” at the Rhinebeck farm. Eventually the property and poultry business passed to Col. Ruppert’s nephew, Jacob Ruppert Schalk. Mallards were bred at least to the early 1940s, perhaps later. The business continued until Schalk’s death in 1962. Since then the estate has been owned by the Society of St. Ursula.

A telling incident occurred in January 1929 when a swan was found across the Hudson in the Rondout Creek at Kingston. It was easily captured by “two small boys” who called police. The swan was “very tame” and placed in the back seat of the police car where it was “very much at its ease.” It was determined to be missing from Ruppert’s and was returned (*Kingston Daily Freeman*, Jan. 23, 1929).

Fact: Mute Swan sightings were documented by competent birders. The first documented Mute Swan sighting was by Maunsell Crosby from the 1920 Christmas Bird Count. Although Crosby had conducted the count numerous times since 1901, 1920 was the first year he included Vanderburgh Cove in the area he covered. He reported 25 swans and noted “breeding wild for several years.” In 1921 he noted that there were 26 swans the previous fall although they were fed in the winter, even having holes chopped in the ice for them. Crosby would continue to check the cove for the remainder of the decade, most notably on his Christmas Counts as well as during an annual May Census.

In 1920 Crosby began working at the American Museum of Natural History and soon invited many prominent ornithologists to join him during the May Census and at other times. Ludlow Griscom was one who participated many times and was well aware of the swans and their status. So was John Baker, soon to become head of the National Association of Audubon Societies. Through one or more of these people Roger Peterson also became aware of the swans.

Crosby documented that a pair successfully nested on the railroad embankment in 1922. He also reported that the swans were trapped in the winter as losses had occurred in previous years. While Crosby said he saw swans a few miles north of the cove, there are no extant records of these sightings. Clearly the impression Crosby leaves through 1923 is that the swans were breeding and possibly spreading. However by 1925 he was calling them “semi-domesticated” and their “validity ... may well be questioned.” Crosby died in 1931 and no further Christmas Counts included the cove; however, the May Census continued and did normally include a stop at the cove.

Griscom published his *Birds of the New York City Region* in 1923; Crosby reviewed the proof. Griscom says the Mute Swan was “introduced on the Hudson River near Rhinebeck” and “the Rhinebeck birds have also migrated.” Given Griscom’s reputation for confirming facts, surprisingly little data is available to back these claims. Peterson’s first *Field Guide* in 1934 says “the Mute Swan has now established itself in numbers in a wild state throughout that area” which included the “lower Hudson valley.”



Ruppert's Linwood Farm, perhaps in the 1930s. Vanderburgh Cove is left bound by the railroad and the Hudson River beyond; three poultry houses are on the hillside, long duck house below; mansion not visible beyond the water tower.

LINWOOD FARM, breeders of White Plymouth Rock chicks. Hatches Monday and Thursdays. Tel. Rhinebeck 404. 4-10tf

Advertisement from *Rhinebeck Gazette*, 1947.



Mute Swans at Thorndale, the home of Oakleigh Thorne in Millbrook, likely 1910s. Nothing is known of his swans beyond this photo.

Fact: The number of Mute Swans in Rhinebeck decreased and did not expand in Dutchess County. From the accompanying table, it can be seen that the number of swans gradually decreased. With the passing of Ruppert, Sr. in 1915 and his wife in 1924, perhaps the swans received less focus. By the end of the 1930s only a few swans appear present, perhaps more as pets. By 1951 swans were no longer reported from the cove or anywhere else in Dutchess County. The size of the flock and seasonal change in numbers suggests the flock was initially managed as part of the poultry business. Curiously, nine Mute Swans were reported at Cruger Island on Jan. 29, 1949, the largest number for 20 years either side of 1949.

Mute Swan Sightings in Dutchess County Maximum number recorded in one day in Spring (March, April, May) and Fall (Oct., Nov., Dec.)								
Year	Sp	Fall	Year	Sp	Fall	Year	Sp	Fall
1904	+ * Jan							
1907	+	*						
1913	32+							
1920		26	1930	4 nested		1940	0?	+?
1921	+		1931	+	4	1941	+	
1922	+ nested		1932	8		1942	+	
1923	+	27	1933	+		1943	+	
1924	+	3	1934	+		1944	+	
1925	10	24	1935	+		1945	+	?
1926	10	25	1936	+		1946	1	
1927	6	10	1937	0?		1947	1?	
1928	4	9	1938	+		1948	0?	
1929	3		1939	+		1949	+	?
						1950	0?	
						1951	+	?
+ = sighting recorded without count. * = not explicitly stated as Mute Swans. All sightings are at or near Vanderburgh Cove except ? = location not given. 0? = not found on May Census but not clear if Vanderburgh Cove was included in the census route that year.								

It was not until 1976 that Mute Swans again regularly appeared in Dutchess County; there were, however, scattered sightings during the 1960s and early 1970s. The first confirmed nesting in Dutchess County beyond Vanderburgh Cove in 1930 came in 1978 at Lake Ellis, Dover. They have expanded and nested regularly since then, first mostly in the southern and western portions but soon throughout Dutchess County.

In 1959, Rockland County reported "Formerly rare winter visitor, now breeding on Congers Lake and perhaps Lake DeForest. ... The occasional winter visitors prior to 1950 probably came from Long Island." Ulster County checklists from 1951 and 1960 do not include the Mute Swan in that county.

Conclusion: contrary to what has been repeated in many books and articles, the subsequent expansion of Mute Swans through the lower Hudson Valley was not the result of birds "introduced" in Rhinebeck. While it is possible Mute Swans escaped from the Ruppert's, these do not appear to have established a population in the Hudson Valley.

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[Editor's Note: an earlier version of this article was published in *Wings Over Dutchess*, the newsletter of the Ralph T. Waterman Bird Club, Volume 56, Number 11. It is re-published in *The Kingbird* with permission.]

