

New migrants

Published: January 13, 2026, 11:06 am

I was at Welney this morning, the Norfolk bird reserve about five miles north of Ely, where large numbers of Whooper swans overwinter every year. They began returning from Iceland, where they breed, last week, and whilst we were there, nineteen more adults with fourteen cygnets turned up, almost certainly having made the 1,200-kilometre nonstop flight overnight.

Nighttime flying works for the swans. It is thought that they lose less heat and that the air is less dense, making it easier for them to make progress.

I find this a staggering achievement, and for the cygnets, this will, of course, have been a first such trip. They could make many more over the years to come. The average life expectancy of this swan is about nine years, although some live much longer. How they navigate so precisely is amazing. How they do this with no physical preparation is astonishing, and yet, like many geese, that is precisely what they are designed to do.

I just watched them in quiet awe. This is not a good photo, but it shows some of those new migrants. The wind had not encouraged me to take anything better than my phone this morning. But I thought this was worth sharing.

It is for moments like these that I enjoy birdwatching, and that is why visiting the same place often is so rewarding. Every day is different.

