

A report to the Nature Conservancy Council
by D.G.Salmon, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucester, GL2 7BT

SUMMARY

Sample age counts throughout the British range in autumn 1989 located only a tiny number of first-winter Dark-bellied Brent Geese. The few juveniles were mostly concentrated on the Hampshire coast. The 1989 breeding season therefore appears to have been almost a complete failure, as confirmed by reports from the breeding area and the Continent. The prediction for the 1988-89 population size is roughly 200,000 in total, with 80-120,000 in Britain.

INTRODUCTION

As usual, autumn flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese in Britain were sampled throughout the main range by volunteer National Wildfowl Count observers and NCC and WWT staff in 1989, in order to ascertain the proportion of Juveniles in the flocks and thereby enable a prediction of the likely population size.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The table (overleaf) summarises the results by area, all samples being totalled for each site, in the Total Aged column. As there were many repeat counts at some sites, these figures and the resultant total of c.39,000 probably substantially overestimate the number of individuals involved. The Largest Sample column shows the highest number surveyed at each site in any one day, and therefore represents the minimum number of individuals sampled at that site. Even though some birds may have moved between sites, the total of c.17,000 probably underestimates the number of geese sampled in the country as a whole.

It appears that the 1989 breeding season was a virtually complete failure. Out of the above totals a maximum of only 22 first winter birds was found. Apart from the Hamford Water juvenile, found on 28th September (see Table), all but one were in Hampshire in mid-September 9 in a flock of 17 at Keyhaven on 16th; 8 in a flock of 17 at Langstone Harbour (20 miles east) on the same day and 4 out of 23 at the latter site the following day. Some double counting may be involved here. An isolated juvenile was present at Keyhaven on 6th November (not in Table). There was also an unconfirmed report from another source of 33 Juveniles among 167 birds in Hampshire. These records appear to represent a small, isolated group of families which, for some reason, migrated very early to the south coast. Normally families migrate later than non-breeding birds, yet no more juveniles were found in the flocks surveyed throughout the country over the subsequent two months. Judging by previous poor seasons a few more juveniles may yet appear, however.

There is strong evidence from elsewhere to support the impression gained from the British counts. During an expedition to Siberia in the summer c.40,000 Dark-bellied Brent Geese were surveyed and an estimate of less than 1% young obtained (P.Prokosch in *litt.*). In early October a total of 1,942 were searched in Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland and no juveniles found (CJT/JT).

The world population of Dark-bellied Brent Geese numbered 235,000 in 1989-89 (A.St Joseph), and the maximum British total from the National Wildfowl Counts was 104,000 (both figures slightly below the level predicted). Assuming an average 15% annual mortality the 1989-90 world figure could be expected to have declined to about 200,000. In recent years 40-60% of the world population have been present in Britain at peak. One would therefore predict the numbers in this country to reach 80-120,000 this winter.

As usual, habitat details were collected. Very few of the geese were on winter cereal, apart from a flock of 1,720 at Bosham Creek, Chichester Harbour on 19th November.

SAMPLE AGE COUNTS OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN BRITAIN, AUTUMN 1989

PLACE	DATE OF FIRST & LAST SAMPLE AGED	TOTAL	LARGEST SAMPLE	NO. YOUNG	OBSERVER
Lincs/Humbs coast	3/10-28/11	3109	970	0	JW/DG
The Wash	11-18/10	308	308	0	JW
Scolt Head, Norfolk	24/9-29/11	2778	350	0	CRC
Wells/Holkham, Norf	28/9-28/11	4000	900	0	DH
Blakeney, Norfolk	12/11	1056	1056	0	JW
Salthouse, Norfolk	12-26/11	173	87	0	DH/JW
Orwell Elt, Suffolk	11-30/10	299	124	0	MW
Hamford Water, Essex	28/9-28/11	1213	254	1	HH
Blackwater Elt, Essex	17/10-12/11	3081	1535	0	RK/ JTh
Wakering, Essex	14/10-18/11	325	255	0	RK
Foulnesl, Essex	14/10-18/11	2878	1766	0	RK
leigh/Two Tree, Essex	11/10-21/11	3002	2200	0	RK
Swale, Kent	15-29/10	1984	1491	0	PH
Chichester Hbr, Sussex	29/10-26/11	5642	2376	0	CRT/JMT/CJT/CBC
Langstone Hbr, Hanta	16/9-30/11	4844	360	12	DB et al.
Southampton W, Hant.	26/11	60	60	0	CRT/JMT
Beaulieu Eat, Hants	22/10-26/11	568	404	0	CRT/JMT
lepe, Hanh	18-28/11	307	122	0	JM
Keyhaven, Hants	16/9-25/11	2317	1360	9	EW/MC/PF
Exe Estuary, Devon	6/11	883	883	0	RK
TOTAL		38827	16861	22	

OBSERVERS- D.Billett et al., C.R.Campbell, C.B.Collins, M.Combridge, P.Comb.idge, D.George, D.Henshilwood, P.Holmi, M.Hutchings, R.King, J.Maskey, J.Thorogood, C.R.Tubbs, J.M.Tubbs, C.J.Tyas, J..alker, E.Wiseman, M.Wright.

December 1989