

NATIONAL WILDFOWL COUNTS

PINK-FOOTED AND GREYLAG GEESE IN BRITAIN, NOVEMBER 1986

Introduction

With the exception of just over 3,000 wild Greylags in Ireland (Merne 1986: Irish Birds 3: 207-214), the entire Icelandic breeding populations of Pink-footed *Anser brachyrhynchus* and Greylag Geese *A. anser* winter in Britain. Since these species generally spend the day away from water, feeding on agricultural fields, a large number are missed by the regular monthly wildfowl counts. Special censuses are therefore carried out on the roosts and feeding grounds. The 27th annual autumn census of Pink-footed and Greylag Geese in Britain took place over the weekend of 15th/16th November 1986. A record total of 136,000 Pinkfeet was found, together with 102,000 Greylag5, the second highest ever. (Feral Greylags are omitted, except in areas where wild birds also occur, notably Dumfries & Galloway).

Weather and conditions

The weekend of the count coincided with a full moon, making the location of birds at dusk and dawn less predictable. In one region where there is a particularly high concentration of major goose resorts - south-east Scotland counts were undertaken a week earlier (8th/9th November). Conditions then turned out to be very poor, with gale to storm force winds and driving rain on the Saturday night and very dull if drier weather on the Sunday morning. The Lothians team were able to repeat the counts on 15th/16th November (including the massive roost at West Water Reservoir, Tweeddale), and, helped by slightly better visibility, located more birds. The organiser also felt that there had been a movement of Pinkfeet back into the area during the week (a record total of 73,000 having been found in the Lothians and Borders in mid-October). The results of the counts of 15th/16th November have therefore been taken for the Lothians and West Water Reservoir, and those of 7th/8th in the Borders are felt, if anything, to be likely to underestimate the mid-monthly total for Pinkfeet.

On the evening of 15th November conditions were generally dry, though with some cloud in central Scotland; winds were light south-westerly and visibility excellent. By dawn on 16th, when most counts were undertaken, the wind and cloud had increased, and there were heavy showers in many areas. Visibility was variable. A few observers commented that the full moon had affected the count, but it is not considered that this significantly reduced the numbers of geese located.

The harvest was fairly clean, but slightly late, with spilt grain remaining in some areas. Grass feeding was noted in a few areas.

Table 1. Nos of Pinkfeet and Greylags counted in Britain, November 1984 - 1986

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov 1984	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1984	Nov 1985	Nov 1986
Orkney	-	-	-	310	630	320
Highland						
Caithness	-	-	-	1700	3330	5880
Sutherland/Wester Ross	-	-	-	-	110	-
Easter Ross	410	-	20	5530	5370	6360
Inverness	-	-	-	-	80	5890
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	50	510	1240
Nairn	-	-	-	1360	-	-
Grampian						
Moray	-	-	-	1860	6140	8000
Banff & Buchan	8850	12100	15550	4250	4620	6600
Gordon	11000	13800	9630	6920	9440	6160
Kincardine & Dee	-	-	-	7000	15000	8200
Tayside						
Angus	11860	15300	21800	4530	4140	4270
Perth & Kinross	11780	15230	24800	12060	34390	24530
Central	1350	1230	1190	350	1030	640
Fife	2500	5000	5500	-	1000	2050
Lothian						
West Lothian	490	10	20	580	960	860
Midlothian	70	4600	6680	220	130	700
East Lothian	-	10400	5410	250	510	1220
Borders						
Tweeddale	2700	10590	16300	-	10	120
Roxburgh	3000	8700	4140	1260	2100	4450
Berwickshire	-	4430	5530	930	1080	1600
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	-	-	-	4170	4570	2520
Cunningham	-	-	-	170	-	130
Dunbarton	-	-	-	2000	1000	500
Strathkelvin	-	-	-	300	300	870
Lanark	1140	780	410	-	-	290
Renfrew	-	-	-	150	-	-
Kyle & Carrick	-	-	-	580	190	160
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	-	-	-	2580	2940	3620
Stewartry	-	-	-	2280	1350	580
Nithsdale	4630	6830	82	720	450	240
Cumbria	-	-	55	630	1090	1000
Lancashire	15610	15000	16560	-	-	-
Northumberland	190	-	3	3520	4200	2940
Humberside	-	250	-	-	-	-
Lincolnshire	320	30	120	-	-	-
Norfolk	9000	3850	2000	-	-	-
TOTALS	86000	128000	<u>135720</u>	64000	107000	<u>101940</u>

PINKFEET

In addition to the 128,000 counted in the November 1985 census (Table 1) a further 6,000 were found in the general monthly wildfowl counts. The November 1986 counts show a further slight increase, amounting to 3% at sites covered in both 1985 and 1986 (which encompasses 90% of the birds counted). The 1986 breeding season was average. In a sample of 7,000 Pinkfeet in East Central Scotland 18.2% first-winter birds were found. A further 6,000 were aged in other areas, resulting in an overall proportion of 15.3% young.

Eastern Scotland held an even greater proportion than usual (see Table 2), with two-thirds of the total count. The autumn numbers in South-west Scotland and England, on the other hand, were low away from Lancashire, which maintained its consistently high level of recent years. The largest counts were from West Water Reservoir, Berwickshire (16,300), the Loch of Strathbeg, Grampian (15,550), Montrose Basin, Angus (12,600), Loch Leven (10,500), Meikle Loch, Grampian (9,590) and Dupplin Loch, Perth (8,450). In October, West Water Reservoir had held 24,610 Pinkfeet. The cold snap in mid-January brought some interesting reports of Pinkfoot movements. The numbers in Norfolk had built up to about 14,000, but most left when the snow arrived. There were numerous reports across central England, and by 18th January over 25,000 were present in Lancashire, with small numbers in North Wales. There were also reports of a temporary exodus from parts of east Scotland. We would be very interested to hear more on apparent hard weather movements.

GREYLAG

This species also had an average breeding season in 1986, with 19.0% young among 4,600 birds aged in East Central Scotland in November. A slight reduction resulted, but the total was still the second highest ever. Comparing, as with Pinkfeet, sites counted in both 1985 and 1986 showed a 4% reduction. North and east central Scotland again held a very large proportion of the Greylags, with the numbers in south-west Scotland and northern England low. The highest Counts were from the Dinnet Lochs, Grampian (8,200) and Spynie Loch, Grampian (7,750 - see below). There were no reports of significant movements of this relatively sedentary species in the cold weather of January.

Table 2. Regional distribution of Pinkfeet and Greylags, November 1980-1986, expressed as percentages of total population

		Nov 1984	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1984	Nov 1985	Nov 1986
North Scotland	19.4	20.2	18.6	42.0	42.4	47.8	
East Central Scotland	32.0	28.7	39.3	26.4	38.0	30.9	
South-east Scotland	12.6	30.2	28.1	5.0	4.5	8.8	
South-west Scotland	6.7	5.9	0.4	20.1	11.1	9.7	
North England	18.4	11.7	12.2	6.5	3.9	2.9	
East England	10.9	3.2	1.6	-	-	-	

News

A Local Public Enquiry took place on March 23rd to hear an appeal by one of the owners of the Loch of Strathbeg, near Aberdeen, against a Nature Conservation Order issued by the Secretary of State for Scotland in October 1986, preventing shooting on the islands and peninsula at the top end of the loch. This area contains one of the largest grey goose roosts in Britain, which together with a major concentration of Whooper Swans renders this an Internationally Important site. Dr Myrfyn Owen, the Wildfowl Trust's Assistant Director of Research, was a key witness for the case for upholding the Order. The Enquiry has been adjourned until May.

Major mortality of Greylag Geese occurred at Spynie Loch, near Elgin, in the autumn. On his November visit the counter - Mr J.W. Stewart - found several dead whilst others were excessively tame and some were among trees away from the loch. He kept an eye on the situation, and by 7th December 285 dead Greylags had been picked up, with the real toll probably nearer 500. Tests revealed that nearly all the birds had lead poisoning, and most had lead pellets (mostly shotgun pellets but also anglers' weights) in their gizzards. The level of the loch had

been unusually low, and it appears that the geese had ingested lead long in the ground while taking in grit; both shooting and fishing were stopped at the loch in 1981.

If you have had difficulty obtaining *Wildfowl in Great Britain* (!) copies are available from the Wildfowl Trust at £ 30 post-free.

The report on the 1985-86 wildfowl counts has unfortunately been seriously delayed by a succession of problems; publication is expected in a few weeks, however - and it will be bigger and better than ever! (All of you should receive a copy, but let me know if you do not.)

You should already have received a note from Tony Fox concerning the 113 Pinkfeet ringed at Martin Mere on 31/1/87. Attempts were made to catch more, but failed due to bad weather. As I write we await resightings from haunts further north as the geese head for the breeding grounds. Plans for the expedition to NE Iceland to catch and mark Pinkfeet with the same white plastic leg rings are well advanced, departing in mid-July to arrive as the geese moult. The results will be given in the autumn circulation.

Acknowledgements

The National Wildfowl Counts are funded by the Nature Conservancy Council.

I would like to thank all organisers and counters for their co-operation and understanding while I "took up the reins" of the goose counts from Dr Malcolm Ogilvie. Malcolm himself, now Director of the Islay Field Centre, has answered my regular requests for advice fully and cheerfully, as well as again carrying out many of the counts and age samples in East Central Scotland (subcontracted by the Wildfowl Trust.)

I would also like specifically to thank the following, with apologies for any inadvertent omissions: I.J.Andrews, G.Appleton, S.J.Aspinall, C.O.Badenoch, Dr A.Barclay, J.A.G.Barnes, D.Bell, Dr M.V.Bell, T.Binny, L.GBlacow, P.ould, I.Brockway, D.Bromwich, A.W.Brown, E.D.Cameron, C.R.G.Campbell, M.F.Carrier, C.R.Casey, N & J.Clark, Mr & Mrs J.Clarke, A.J.Clunas, R.Cook, P.Corkill, D.A.Creasy, N.Crowther, R.C.Dickson, R.H.Dennis, J.Doherty, J.Dunbar, Rev & Mrs A.R.Duncan-Jones, M.H.Dunn, Dr M.East, J.Edelsten, A.Elliot, A.Emmerson, A.Ferguson, W.Fiddler, V.Flemming, D.Forshaw, J.A.Forster, S.Furmadge, N.Gibson, R.Goater, A.G.Gordon, P.R.Gordon, Mrs J.A.R.Grant, Mr & Mrs H.Green, D.O.Grieve, S.R.Hacker, J.F.D.Hargreaves, Dr M.P.Harris, M.I.Harvey, Mr & Mrs A Henry, D.H.B.Howie, H.G.Huxley, Mrs M Howat, Dr D Jenkins, J.Kirk, E.Kitchen, D.Lambert, D.Lamont, S Laybourne, Mr & Mrs J.Lister, R.Lord, J.D.Lough, J.McNish, J.Malster, A.Mathison, R.P.Mason, J.Mitchell, S.Mitchell, M.Moss, R.D.Murray, D.A.O'Connor, Mrs C.Ogilvie, D.Orritt, Dr M.Owen, A.J.Panter, J.Parkin, Dr I.J.Patterson, K.Patterson, R.Pearson, W.M.Peet, B.Pounder, B.Redman, P.Revnolds, M.Richardson, R.Richter, J.F.Riddoch, B.Robertson, J.Ross, M.B.Ross, B.Sage, C.Scotland, Mr & Mrs S Shimeld, P.Shimmings, E.M.Smith, Dr P.H.Smith, Dr R.A.H.Smith, I.J.Simper, J.W.Stewart, I.S.Suttie, S.Taylor, I.D.L.Thomson, D Thorogood, P.Todd, C.Tomlinson, J.V.Turner, P.Vandomne, R.Walker, J.H.Wallace, R.Walls, Miss R.Walton, S.Wanless, A.D.Watson, P.N.Watts, G.Williams, A.A.Wright, G.M.Wright, W.Wright, B.Zonfillo.

March 1987

David Salmon
Organiser, National Wildfowl Counts
The Wildfowl Trust
Slimbridge
Gloucester
GL2 7BT