

# WWT/JNCC/SNH Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme

## survey results 2015/16

### British Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

## 1. Abundance

The abundance of British Greylag Geese in Britain during 2015/16 was monitored through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Results are presented on WeBS Report Online.

### Numbers at key sites in Scotland

An annual census of all British Greylag Geese is not undertaken, but annual counts and estimates of breeding success are carried out in four key areas in Scotland where Greylag Geese are actively managed, namely Orkney, the Uists (Outer Hebrides), Tiree/Coll (Inner Hebrides) and Harris/Lewis (Outer Hebrides).

On Tiree, the late summer (August) count totalled 1,903 geese (Figure 1), a 32% decrease compared to the previous year. The count in August 2015 may have been an underestimate due to late silage cutting in wet weather, which meant that there were many more long-grass silage fields around than normal during the count, in which geese could potentially hide unseen. However, the peak winter count was 2,047 birds in mid-January 2016, suggesting that the late August count was reasonably accurate despite the conditions. As recently as 2006, 4,005 Greylag Geese were counted on Tiree.

On the Uists, 6,188 Greylag Geese were counted in early September (Figure 1), a decrease of 24.8% on the previous year. However, this was after shooting had started in early August. During a second count in late February 2016, 4,293 geese were counted, a decrease of 23.0% compared to the previous year.

On Orkney, an archipelago-wide census carried out in late August found 21,354 Greylag Geese (Mitchell *et al.* 2015), the majority being on Mainland (11,621 birds) (Figure 2). This was a 6.8% decrease on the previous year (Mitchell *et al.* 2014).

On Harris/Lewis, a survey in autumn 2015 found 3,794 Greylag Geese, a 30% decline on the previous year.

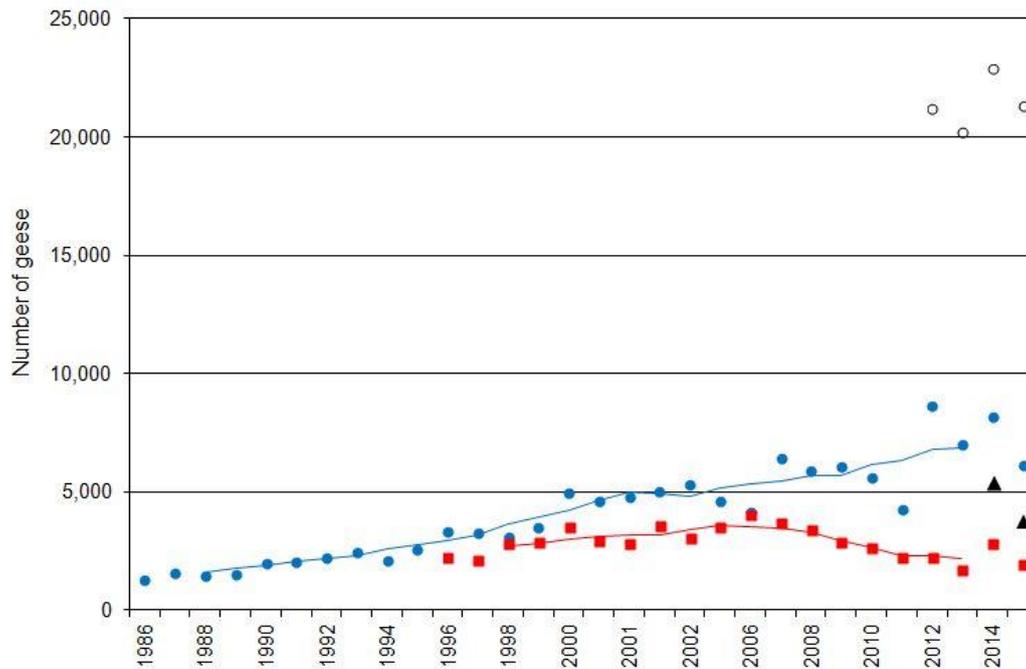


Figure 1. Late summer counts of British Greylag Geese on the Uists (blue circles), Tiree (red squares), Orkney (black open circles) and Harris/Lewis (Black triangles), 1986 to 2015. Five-year running means shown as lines. Data for Harris & Lewis provided by SNH.

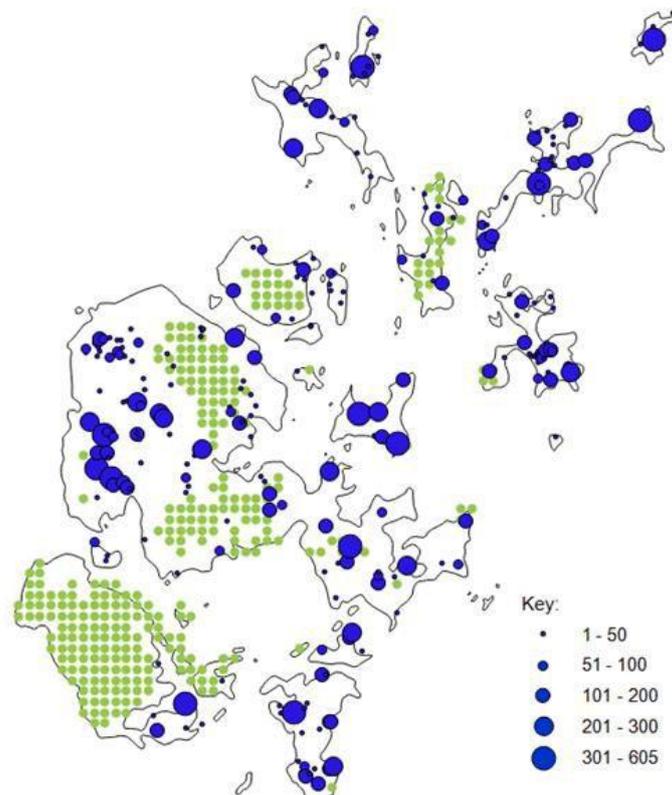


Figure 2. The distribution of Greylag Geese found during field surveys in Orkney in late August 2015 (from Mitchell et al. 2015). Blue dots are proportional to flock size. Green dots indicate 1km squares dominated by moorland habitat.

## 2. Breeding success

Breeding success in Orkney was estimated at 27.0% young in late summer flocks, with a mean brood size of 3.37 young per successful pair. On Tiree, breeding success was 29.7%, with a mean brood size of 2.54 young per successful pair. On the Uists, breeding success was estimated at 24.8% young with a mean brood size of 2.83 young and on Harris/Lewis the values were 16.8% young with a mean brood size of 2.65 young per successful pair (Figure 3).

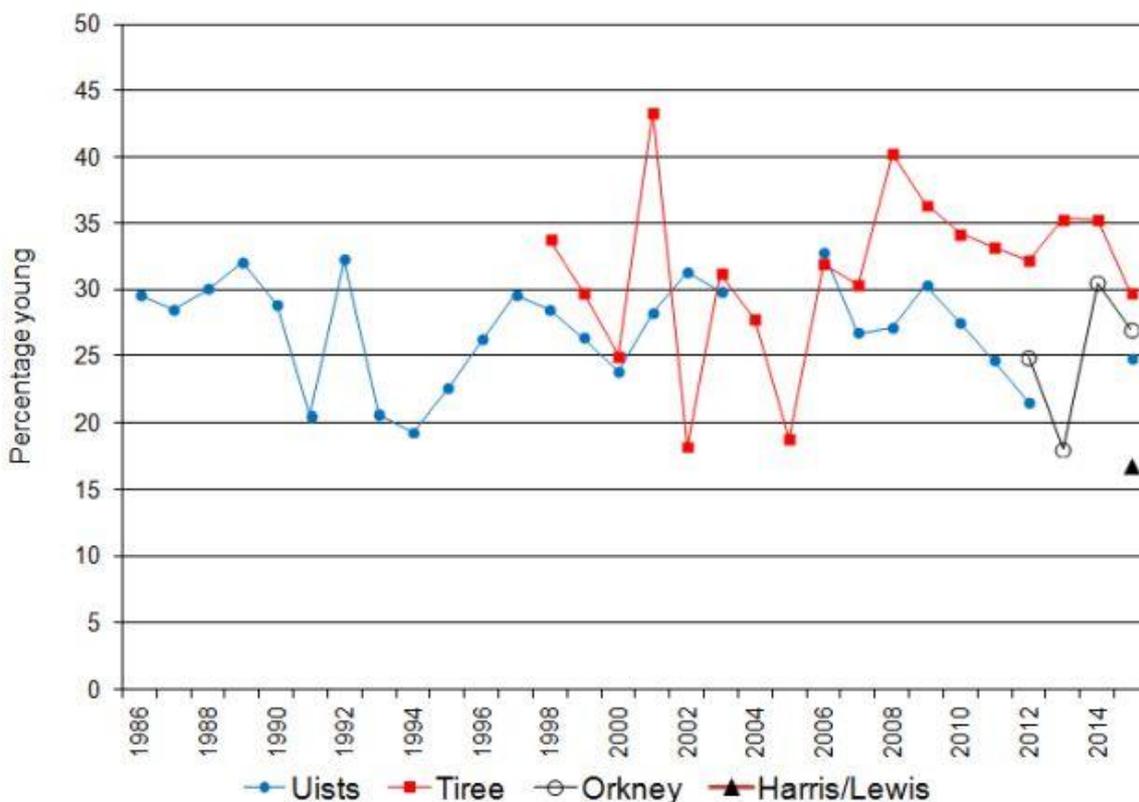


Figure 3. The percentage of young British Greylag Geese recorded on the Uists (blue circles) 1986-2015 (no data were collected in 2004, 2005, 2013 and 2014), on Tiree (red squares) 1998-2015, on Orkney (black open symbols) 2012-2015 and on Harris/Lewis (black triangles) 2015. Data from Bowler et al. (2008), J. Bowler pers. comm., SNH, Mitchell et al. (2015) and Mitchell (2015).

## 3. Discussion

British Greylag Geese continue to do remarkably well, with numbers and distribution both increasing. For example, the latest WeBS trend for the whole of the UK shows a steady increase in numbers, especially since the 1980s. Some sites hold particularly large concentrations, for example: Nosterfield Gravel Pits, North Yorkshire (3,132 birds, 5 year average 2010/11 to 2014/15), North Norfolk coast (2,172), Loch Leven, Kinross (1,872) and Lower Derwent Ings, North Yorkshire (1,614).

The increase in abundance in Scotland led to calls to control numbers in key areas where the geese interacted with agricultural economic interests. Three areas in Scotland were chosen for pilot adaptive management schemes (Orkney, the Uists and Tiree/Coll) and these areas have been subject to recent

licensed shooting during the close season as well as an increase in shooting during the open season. In 2015, the management scheme was extended to Harris/Lewis.

The goal of the Orkney pilot management scheme is to reduce damage to agricultural economic interests by maintaining the current levels of shooting in order to bring the summer population of British Greylag Geese down to 9,000 to 11,000 birds (SNH *in litt.*). The late August 2015 count in Orkney was the fourth annual archipelago-wide assessment and showed that the number had decreased slightly by 6.8% compared to the previous year. Nearly 10,000 geese were shot there in the previous 12 months although during the winter some of the geese shot will have been migrants from Iceland. However, given that between c.20,000 and c.23,000 Greylag Geese have been counted in Orkney during late August in 2012 to 2015, it seems the rapid increase in number up to 2012 (of c. 19% per annum, see Mitchell *et al.* 2012) has stopped and that, due to increased shooting, the population trend has stabilised.

The number of Greylag Geese counted on the Uists in September 2015 (6,188) was 24.8% lower than the previous year. As on Orkney, the recent increase in shooting appears to have led to a stabilisation in numbers. The goal of the pilot management scheme on the Uists is to bring the summer population down to 3,600 to 4,400 birds (SNH *in litt.*). Numbers counted on Tiree (1,903) in late August 2015 were 32% lower than the previous year, although the total may have been an undercount due to the wet summer. The current peak counts of Greylag Geese, at any time of the year on Tiree are just over a half of what they were in 2006. Under the management scheme, the target population range for Greylag Geese is of 1,350 to 1,650 birds on Tiree and 300 to 550 birds on Coll (SNH *in litt.*). Numbers on Harris/Lewis have been relatively stable at between 3,700 to 5,800 birds since 2010

#### Acknowledgements

Goose and age counts from Tiree were kindly provided by John Bowler. Goose counts on the Uists and Harris/Lewis were provided by SNH.

## 4. References

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## Goose & Swan Monitoring