

WWT/JNCC/NatureScot Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme survey results 2020/21

British Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

1. Abundance

The trend in abundance of British Greylag Geese is monitored through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Results are available via the WeBS report online.

Numbers at key sites in Scotland

Annual counts of British Greylag Geese are carried out in key areas in Scotland where Greylag Geese are actively managed. In most years these are Orkney, the Uists (Outer Hebrides) and Tiree/Coll (Inner Hebrides), but with Harris/Lewis (Outer Hebrides) in only some years. A population count and assessment of annual breeding success is usually carried out in late August to assess numbers post-breeding and before the shooting season starts. However, in 2020/21 surveillance was curtailed by travel restrictions due to Covid-19, and counts were only carried out on Tiree.

On Tiree, the late August 2020 count was 3,203 birds, an increase of 17.3% compared to 2019 (2,730) (Figure 1).

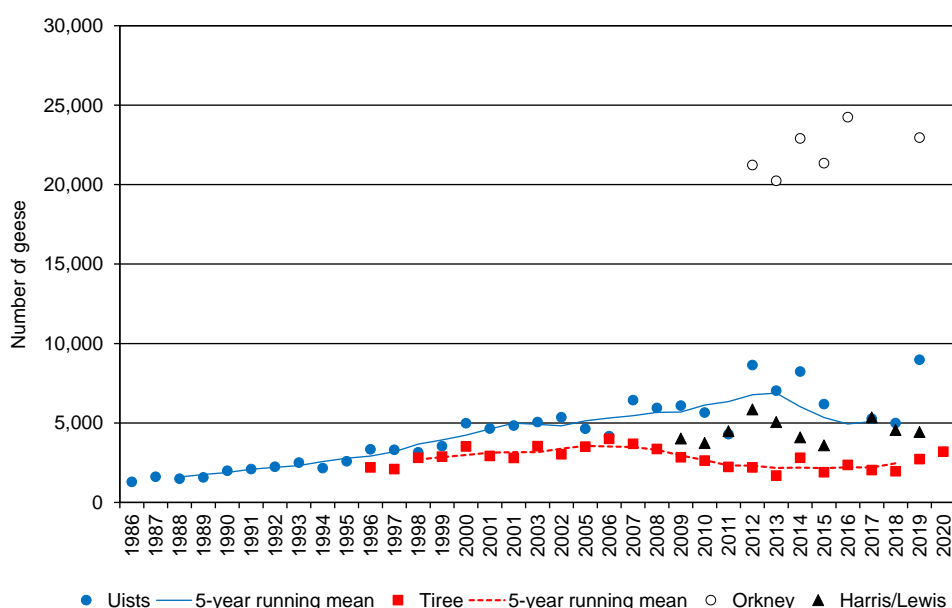


Figure 1. Late summer counts of British Greylag Geese on the Uists (blue solid circles), Tiree (red squares), Orkney (black open symbols) and spring counts of Harris/Lewis (black triangles) 1986–2020. Five-year running means (e.g. the mean for 2018 is from 2016–2020) shown for the Uists (blue solid line) and Tiree (red dotted line); Orkney and Harris/Lewis have too few years with count data to generate five year means.

2. Breeding success

Population-wide sampling of annual breeding success of British Greylag Geese is not undertaken, but data are collected in 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) in some years. However, due to Covid-19 travel restrictions in 2020, breeding success was only carried out on Tiree where there was an estimated at 45.9% young in late summer flocks (Figure 2), with a mean brood size of 2.89 young per successful pair.

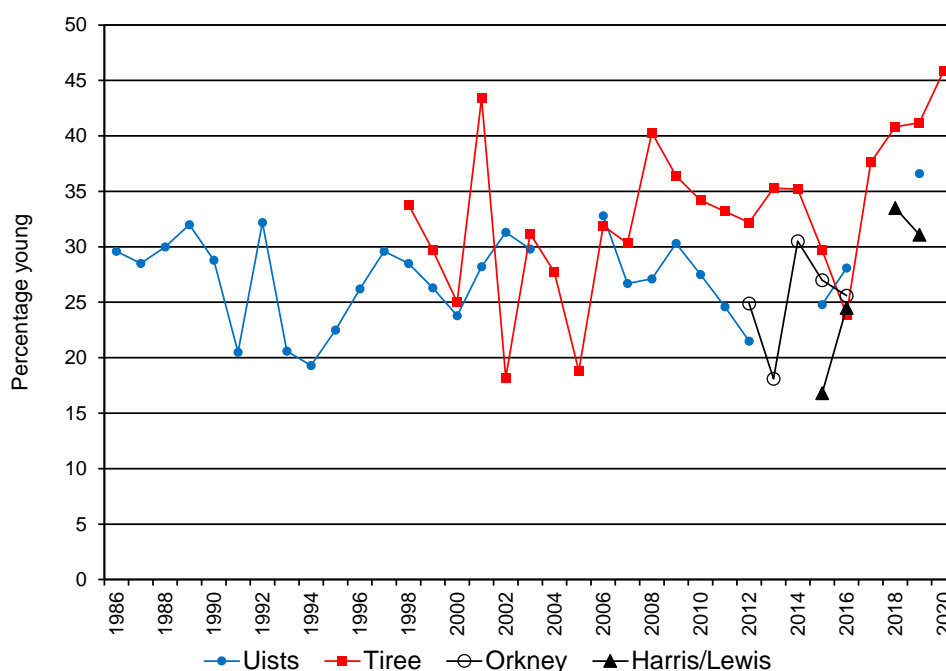


Figure 2. The percentage of young British Greylag Geese recorded in flocks on: the Uists 1986–2019 (blue solid circles; no data were collected in 2004, 2005, 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2018), Tiree 1998–2020 (red squares), Orkney 2012–2016 (black open circles) and Harris/Lewis 2015–2019 (black triangles; no data were collected in 2017).

3. Discussion

The number and distribution of British Greylag Geese appear to have continued to increase; the latest WeBS trend, for the whole of Britain, shows a steady increase in numbers, especially since the 1980s (Frost *et al.* 2021). The increase in abundance in parts of Scotland has led to active control of numbers in key areas where the geese cause conflict 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 an increase in shooting during the open season. On Orkney, licensed shooting has been extended into the close season too. In these areas numbers have stabilised.

Numbers counted on Tiree in late August 2020 (3,203) were 17.3% higher than the previous year and breeding success there was estimated at 45.9% young. This was the fourteenth year in a row that breeding success surveillance recorded over 25% young and the highest value ever recorded. The increase in the population and record breeding success probably reflects a “bounce back” following an absence of shooting parties on the island in winter 2019/20, no egg-gelling due to people’s movements being restricted as a results of the Covid-19 pandemic, and good weather in spring 2020. Even so, the current peak counts of Greylag Geese on Tiree, at any time of the year, 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 (SNH *in litt.*).

4. Acknowledgements

Thanks to RSPB Scotland for providing counts and breeding success data from Tiree.

5. References

Frost, T.M., N.A. Calbrade, G.A. Birtles, C. Hall, A.E. Robinson, S.R. Wotton, D.E. Balmer & G.E. Austin. 2021. *Waterbirds in the UK 2019/20: The Wetland Bird Survey*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC, Thetford.

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Goose & Swan Monitoring