

WWT/JNCC/NatureScot Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme survey results 2019/20

British Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

1. Abundance

The trend in British Greylag Geese is monitored through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Results are presented on WeBS Report Online.

Numbers at key sites in Scotland

Annual counts of British Greylag Geese are carried out in key areas in Scotland by RSPB and NatureScot where Greylag Geese are actively managed: these are Orkney, Harris/Lewis (Outer Hebrides), the Uists (Outer Hebrides) and Tiree/Coll (Inner Hebrides).

On Tiree, the late summer (August 2019) count totalled 2,730 geese (Figure 1), a 38.7% increase compared to the previous year. In Orkney, in late summer 2019, 22,956 Greylag Geese were counted, a 5.3% decrease on the number counted in August 2016, when the last survey was undertaken. On the Uists, 8,979 Greylag Geese were counted in late summer 2019, a 79.6% increase on the previous year. On Harris/Lewis, counts are undertaken in the early spring and in February 2020, 4,430 birds were recorded, a 3% decline compared to the previous year.

Note, that in all four areas, late summer counts can be affected by the timing of the harvest. In years when the arable crop harvest is early, the geese tend to feed on stubbles and can be more visible and more accurate counts can be undertaken. These differences in the ability to detect the geese may lead to the variability on year-on-year totals.

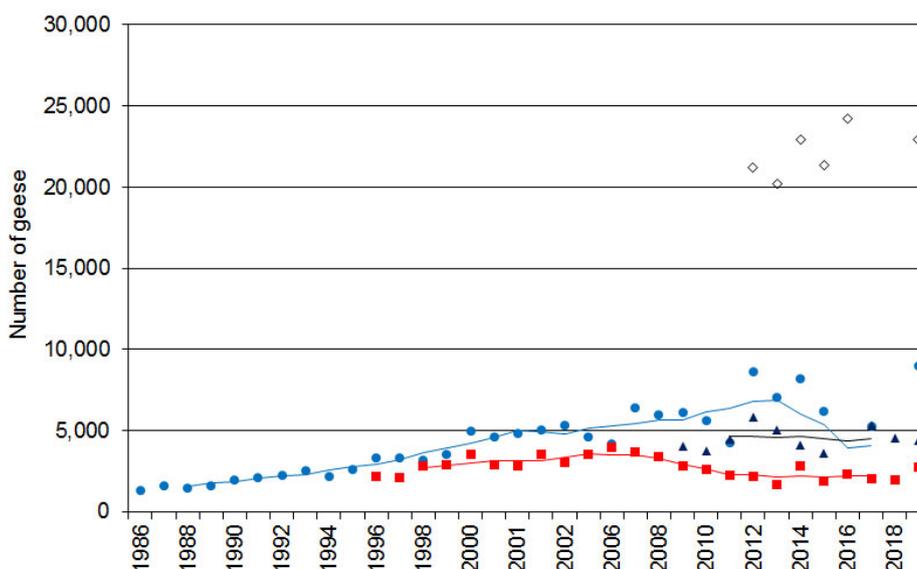


Figure 1. Late summer counts of British Greylag Geese on the Uists (blue circles), Tiree (red squares), Orkney (black open symbols) and spring counts of Harris/Lewis (Black triangles) 1986 to 2019. Five-year running means shown as lines (apart from Orkney; too few years with count data).

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.

In 2019, on the Uists, breeding success was high with 36.6% young recorded in a sample of 1,438 birds in October (Figure 2). On Harris/Lewis, breeding success was also high with 31.1% young recorded in a sample of 1,278 birds in October. Breeding success on Tiree was estimated at 41.2% young in late summer flocks, with a mean brood size of 2.47 young per successful pair.

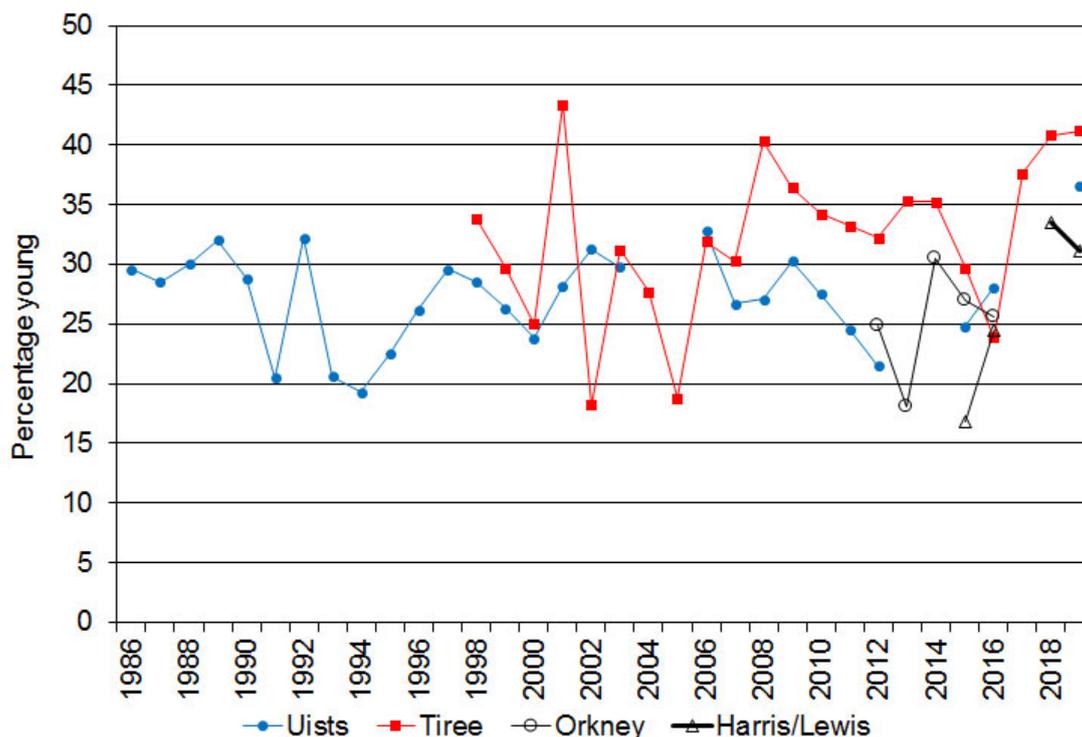


Figure 2. The percentage of young British Greylag Geese recorded in flocks on the Uists (blue circles), on Tiree (red squares), on Orkney (black open circles) and on Harris/Lewis (black triangles), 1986–2019. Note, data have not been collected at each sites every year.

3. Discussion

The number and distribution of British Greylag Geese both appear to continue to increase; the latest WeBS trend, for the whole of the UK, shows a steady increase in numbers, especially since the 1980s (Frost *et al.* 2020). The increase in abundance in parts of Scotland has led to calls to control numbers in key areas where the geese cause conflict with agricultural economic interests. Four areas in Scotland were chosen for pilot adaptive management schemes (Orkney, the Uists, Tiree/Coll and Harris/Lewis) and these areas have been subject to an increase in shooting during the open season. In all four areas, licensed shooting has been extended into the close season too. In these areas numbers have stabilised. The populations were reduced to target ranges in three of the pilots and numbers have stabilised on Orkney.

Numbers on Orkney in early September 2019 (22,956) were 5.3% lower than in August 2016, when the last survey was undertaken and reflect sustained efforts to control numbers there through culling. Numbers

counted on Tiree in late August 2019 (2,730) were 38.7% higher than the previous year reflecting a very good breeding season and slight undercounts in August 2017 and 2018 when some birds remained in hard to count areas away from agricultural fields. 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 was of 1,350 to 1,650 birds on Tiree (NatureScot *in litt.*).

On the Uists, the Greylag Goose population increased by nearly 80% compared to the previous year. This is partly due to the good breeding season (36.6% young in sampled flocks), but probably also due to an undercount in late summer 2018. On Harris/Lewis, spring counts in 2019 and 2020 were similar, although the breeding success in 2019 was also high at 31.1%.

4. Acknowledgements

Thanks to RSPB Scotland and NatureScot for providing the data reported on here.

5. References

Frost, T.M., N.A. Calbrade, G.A. Birtles, H.J. Mellan, C. Hall, A.E. Robinson, S.R. Wotton, D.E. Balmer & G.E. Austin. 2020. *Waterbirds in the UK 2018/19: The Wetland Bird Survey*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC. Thetford.

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Goose & Swan Monitoring