

# A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GOOSE BREEDING SUCCESS, 1987

A report to the Nature Conservancy Council.

By D.G.Salmon, The Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucester, GL2 7BT.  
3rd November 1987.

## SUMMARY

The 1987 breeding season for the Dark-bellied Brent Geese appears to have been virtually a complete failure for the second year running. A maximum of only seven juveniles were reported up to 24th October out of a sample encompassing much of Essex, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the south coast, while on the Continent only six juveniles were found among 8,400 checked in Denmark, West Germany and the Netherlands in mid-October. The total population is likely to number in the region of 150,000 this winter, with 60-90,000 in Britain at peak.

## INTRODUCTION

For the third-year running early autumn age counts were carried out on Dark-bellied Brent Geese in Britain, using volunteer National Wildfowl Count observers and Nature Conservancy Council and Wildfowl Trust staff, under the NCC's contract with the Wildfowl Trust. The sample was expanded this year to cover virtually all parts of the range, from the Exe to the Humber. As usual, recorders were asked to note the date, time, locality and habitat for all observations and the sizes of flocks, number aged, total of juveniles and any broods. Information was obtained for Denmark, West Germany and the Netherlands, via the IWRB.

## RESULTS

The aged samples received to date for Britain are summarised by locality in the table overleaf, with the two samples containing young listed individually. The earliest report for Foulness is of 149 (not aged) on 13th September, during the monthly count. By 27th there were 618 at Foulness, and by 3rd October 8,900 at Foulness and Leigh between them. Elsewhere, sizeable flocks were present at Langstone Harbour by 3rd October (700 on the Hayling shore); Copperas Bay, Stour by 5th (495); Wells Harbour by 13th (909); Scolt Head by 5th (500) and Grainthorpe by 20th (299). These represent fairly normal levels for the early autumn. The total aged sample of 20,362 in the table includes many repeat counts, but the normal movements suggest that an absolute minimum of 6,700 individuals were aged. In addition, 2 young were found among a sample of 500 in Denmark (J.Madsen), 2 among 600 in West Germany (P.Prokosch) and 4 among 7,300 in the Netherlands (B.Ebbinge; C.&J.Tubbs) in mid-October, confirming the impression from Britain.

## DISCUSSION

Although the proportion of young in the British flocks is likely to be fractionally higher by midwinter, as happened last year, it is extremely unlikely, judging by the reports from the Continent, that it will exceed c.0.1%.

Last year's prediction of 163,000 in Europe in 1986-87 appears to have been slightly too low; the midwinter peak has been provisionally

estimated by the IWRB at 169,000, a decline of 11% over 1985-86. The decrease in winters following complete breeding failures has averaged 13.5% over the seven years in question since annual records began in 1960, a figure which if applied to the 1986-87 population would give a level of 146,000 for 1987-88. It would therefore seem sensible to predict that the numbers in Europe this winter will be in the range of 140-150,000.

A total of 85,700 (51% of the European total) was counted in Britain in December 1986, before the onset of the cold weather, towards the top of the range of 64-96,000 predicted, while the February peak - after the cold snap on the Continent - was just over 96,000 (57%). A higher than usual proportion therefore reached Britain even in the mild weather. Based on the above prediction for the numbers in Britain in 1987-88 can be expected to exceed 60,000 (40%) and possibly reach 90,000 (60%).

The nos of Dark-bellied Brent Geese aged in Britain up to 24th October 1987.

PLACE	PERIOD	NO. OF COUNTS	MAX NO. PRESENT	TOTAL AGED SAMPLE *	NO. YOUNG	OBSERVER
Lepe, Hants	1-20/10	11	136	716	0	RC
Langstone Harbour	3/10	1	700	683	0	CT, JT
Nutbourne, Chich'r	27/9	1	46	46	0	CT, JT
Leigh-on-Sea	3/10	1	4,000	1,000	0	RK
"	11/10	1	?	5,000	4	AStJ
Foulness/Wakering	27/9-17/10	3	4,000	7,928	0	RK, MD, DB
Copperas B. Stour	27/9-19/10	4	495	232	0	RL
Hamford Water	30/9	1	30	30	0	MH
Wells Harbour	28/9	1	66	66	0	DH
"	13/10	1	909	909	2	DH
"	20/10	1	208	208	0	DH
Morston	15/10	1	304	137	0	DH
Scolt Head	22/9-18/10	6	900	1,806	0	CC
Saltfleetby-						
Grainthorpe	29/9-17/10	5	195	454	0	JW, EM
"	24/10	1	800	800	1	JW, EM
Grainthorpe	2-20/10	0	299	347	0	DG

\* Includes repeat counts.

OBSERVERS: D.Bridger, C.Campbell, R.Chapman, M.Drake, D.George,  
D.Henshilwood, R.King, R.Leavett, E.Mackrill, A.St.Joseph, C.Tubbs,  
J.Tubbs, J.Walker.