

DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE 1985-6

VERIFICATION OF BREEDING SUCCESS, NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1985

A report to the Nature Conservancy Council.

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Summary

Assessment of breeding success undertaken through November and the first half of December in different parts of the British range confirms that 1985 has been a good though not outstandingly productive season. The percentage young found in flocks from Humberside to Dorset averaged 25.8%, though with considerable local variation. As in October, age-ratios were lower in Essex (16.0%) than elsewhere (30.6%). Information from the continent confirms the British picture.

Report and Results (see Tables)

Preliminary information on the breeding success of the Dark-bellied Brent Geese in 1985 was gathered in October and presented in an earlier Report. Subsequently, counters in different parts of the British range were asked to obtain age-ratios and submit them with their mid-December census results. Assessments in different parts of Essex were continued through November and early December by Mr Roy King (Wildfowl Trust, Abberton), while a personal field trip was made to North Norfolk at the beginning of December.

All age-ratio information received to date is presented in Table 1 and summarised by area in Table 2, where it is further compared with the results obtained in the second half of October. Some of the individual age-ratio counts given in Table 1 are of very small samples of birds but are included for completeness. Perhaps more important is the proportion of the number of birds present that is represented in the aged sample, which only falls below 50% in 7 samples.

There is much evidence that family parties are more prone to come on to farmland over the seawall, and on to saltings, than non-breeders. They are thus more readily observable and estimates of the true breeding success must take this possible bias into account. The data gathered in Essex by Roy King is separated by habitat in Table 1, and where the location of aged birds elsewhere was given by counters, this is included in Table 1. The data are summarised by habitat in Table 3.

Since October, the percentage of young Brent Geese in North Norfolk has increased only very slightly, but it has done so by

rather more on the South Coast so that the two areas are now very similar. The percentage of young in Essex has fallen since October, to about half that elsewhere. It is also lower in the Wash and in Humberside. The much higher figure found in Kent should be treated with caution because of the small sample size.

Information from the continent in late November and early December is confined to some verbal reports confirming the October figures of a moderately good breeding season. The most substantial samples were obtained in France, where in 'several thousand' birds aged there were 33% young.

Discussion

The consistently lower percentage of young found in Essex both in October and subsequently may well be linked with the way that that area receives many of the first arrivals of Brent Geese each autumn. It was evident this October that considerable numbers of non-breeding geese arrived ahead of the successful breeders and their young. It would appear that the former have stayed on in Essex while some at least of the latter have dispersed to other areas. Although some Brent, at least, do move from Essex to other haunts, there is a general tendency for birds to use traditional wintering places year after year. This could be linked with the use of traditional parts of the breeding range and so would have the effect of emphasising any variation in breeding success across that range.

The prediction concerning breeding success from the preliminary age-ratio information gathered in October (see previous Report) was that it would rise from the level then of about 20% to a final figure closer to 30%. That this latter figure has not been reached is due to the large samples showing lower production obtained in Essex. Ideally, age-ratio samples should be gathered in direct proportion to the population in each area. Once the mid-December and mid-January census figures are available it should be possible to adjust the age-ratio data in accordance with the size of the population in each area, though it must be emphasised that this will still only refer to a minority of the total population in north-west Europe.

A further report will be prepared on the results of the mid-December and mid-January censuses, and will include more analysis of the age-ratio data and some estimate of the age structure of the population this winter.

M.A.Ogilvie
31st December 1985

Table 1. Age counts of Dark-bellied Brent Geese, obtained in Britain, November-December 1985. Detailed counts.

Place	Habitat	Total present	Total aged	Young No.	Young %	Observer
Humberside						
Mablethorpe	M	1280	1280	190	14.8	G. Weaver
Cleethorpes	M	618	211	87	41.2	I. Shepherd
Wash						
Holbeach		109	109	30	27.5	P. Watts
"		490	45	19	42.2	"
Gedney		418	418	92	22.0	P. Todd
N. Norfolk						
Various sites	F	6000	4358	1386	31.8	M. Ogilvie
Clay	F	257	257	91	35.4	F. Kelsey
Salthouse	S	322	322	87	27.0	J. Birtwell
Essex						
N. Blackwater	M	2463	2129	349	16.4	R. King
"	F/S	1400	1229	253	20.6	"
S. Blackwater	M	700	649	127	19.6	"
Foulness/Leigh	M	4188	2237	139	6.2	"
"	F/S	800	400	118	29.5	"
Stour	M	364	73	5	6.8	W. Richards
Crouch		1696	300	107	35.7	A. Wood
Bradwell	M	570	52	21	40.4	R. Gibbs
Dengie		505	44	17	38.6	J. Alderton
Kent						
St Mary's Bay	M	600	216	109	50.5	A. Parker
Hampshire						
Langstone	M	7850	3122	970	31.1	D. Billett
Keyhaven		2000	1509	512	33.9	E. Wiseman
"	S	2170	2100	715	34.0	"
Lymington	S	300	150	38	25.3	J. Jones
Isle of Wight						
Newport		750	62	15	24.2	M. Seabrooke
Brading	M	24	22	6	27.3	J. Cleverton
Dorset						
Christchurch		43	43	12	27.9	P. Morrison

Habitat code: M=mudflats; S=saltings; F=farmland

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21337

Table 2. Breeding success of Dark-bellied Brent, Britain
November-December 1985. Summary of data in Table 1.

Area	Number aged	Young No.	%	% in late October
Humberside	1491	277	18.7	-
Wash	572	141	24.7	-
N. Norfolk	4937	1564	31.7	29.1
Essex	7113	1136	16.0	19.5
Kent	216	109	50.5	-
S. Coast	7008	2268	32.4	25.9
TOTAL	21337	5495	25.8	20.6

Table 3. Age-counts of Brent Geese by habitat.

Habitat	No. Aged	Young No.	%
Mudflats	9991	2003	20.0
Saltings/ Farmland	8824	2688	30.5