



**THE
WILDFOWL
& WETLANDS TRUST**

NATIONAL WILDFOWL COUNTS

THE NUMBERS OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN BRITAIN, JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1989

By D.G.Salmon, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Slimbridge, Gloucester, GL2 7BT.

Summary

Censuses of Dark-bellied Brent Geese in Britain in January and February 1989 produced totals of 101,670 (a record) and 87,670 respectively, compared to 91,130 and 87,160 in 1988.

Introduction

For the fourth winter, censuses of Dark-bellied Brent Geese were organised by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust to supplement the monthly National Wildfowl Counts. The counts were undertaken by the regular network of volunteer counters, the set dates being January 15th and February 12th.

Results

Weather and visibility were generally good in both months.

The totals for the sites counted in both 1988 and 1989 suggest an increase of 15% in January 1989 over 1988, but no difference in February. Counts from the few areas not covered in 1989 have therefore been interpolated by adding 15% to the January 1988 figure and repeating the February 1988 figure. The resultant totals are 101,670 in January and 87,670 in February. The January total is the largest on record, the previous highest being 97,000 in February 1987. Table 1 (overleaf) gives the results by major sites and areas. The equivalent figures for 1988 (including data received too late for inclusion in last year's report) are shown in brackets.

Discussion

Sample age counts in late autumn 1988 suggested 34-35% juveniles in the flocks. This led to a prediction of 109-147,000 wintering in Britain, based on an annual mortality rate - confirmed by recent analyses by Summers & Underhill - of 15%. Assuming the January total was the peak the population estimate was therefore too high. The winter was exceptionally mild in north-west Europe generally, and no cold weather influxes were to be expected. However, in the winter of 1987/88, almost as mild, the British peak amounted to 55% of the European total (91,000 v 165,000), whereas in the hard winter of 1981/82 the equivalent proportion was only 46%. Although influxes undoubtedly occur in severe weather their magnitude may depend on the timing, duration and severity of the cold spells. The picture is probably further complicated by movements of birds on to France in particularly severe conditions, different migratory habits between age classes (whose proportions differ markedly from year to year), and longer term changes in feeding habits.

When the continental totals are available it will be easier to place this winter's British results in perspective, but it is clear that predictions regarding the British population in isolation need to be even broader than hitherto.

TABLE 1. NOS. OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN BRITAIN, JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1989 (and in brackets 1988). Figures in italics are interpolated (see text).

	J A N U A R Y		F E B R U A R Y		
	1989	(1988)	1989	(1988)	
Humber	<i>1290</i>	(1120)	<i>440</i>	(440)	
The Wash	<i>24396</i> 20620	(21600)	<i>14900</i>	(23170)	<i>22197</i>
Norfolk (excl Wash)	12710	(9450)	10300	(7600)	
Minsmere/Alde/Ore	470	(53)	100	(7)	
Deben	800	(480)	1000	(300)	
Orwell	220	(960)	610	(890)	
Stour	1350	(970)	950	(1400)	
Hamford Water	3940	(3000)	1270	(3750)	
Blackwater/Colne	12100	(10800)	11520	(10800)	
Dengie	2460	(850)	1500	(2600)	
Crouch	3760	(2500)	5330	(1700)	
Foulness/Canvey	5060	(10600)	6810	(5900)	
S.Thames	330	(270)	490	(210)	
Medway	1860	(2200)	3020	(2910)	
Swale: Shellness	1140	(650)	780	(10)	
Cleve-Conyer	2190	(1900)	0	(0)	
Elmley	37	(32)	700	(700)	
Rest of Kent/Sussex	76	(11)	70	(63)	
Pagham	2480	(1300)	2970	(2600)	
Chichester	10470	(8300)	9660	(9700)	
Langstone	7110	(6800)	5500	(5040)	
Portsmouth	1750	(280)	1740	(1400)	
S'oton W/Solent/IOW	5830	(5100)	4530	(3100)	
Christchurch	190	(71)	210	(100)	
Rest of Dorset	1150	(400+)	1150	(1150)	
Exe	1170	(750)	1150	(1100)	
Rest of Devon/Cornwall	240	(24)	210	(12)	
Burry Inlet	860	(640)	760	(510)	
Rest of GB	4	(23)	3	(1)	
TOTAL	<i>101670</i> <i>105046</i>	(91130)	<i>87670</i> <i>94967</i>	(87160)	

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