



NATIONAL WILDFOWL COUNTS

THE NUMBERS OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN BRITAIN, JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1988

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Summary

Censuses of Dark-bellied Brent Geese in Britain in January and February 1988 produced estimates of 93,000 and 85,000 birds respectively, compared with 89,000 and 97,000 in 1986-87.

Introduction

For the third winter, censuses of Dark-bellied Brent Geese were organised by The Wildfowl Trust under contract to the Nature Conservancy Council in 1987-88, using volunteer observers from the National Wildfowl Counts and BTO/NCC/RSPB Birds of Estuaries Enquiry networks. Instead of December and January, as in the previous two years, January and February were chosen, these being the months when the largest numbers are usually present in Britain. (Co-incidence with censuses elsewhere in Europe is believed to be as great in February as in December.) The set dates were January 17th and February 21st, to correspond with the monthly NWC and BoEE counts. As well as the census results, the recording forms requested details about the usage of the site by the geese, viz. feeding location and habitat, disturbance, agricultural and behavioural changes, protective measures and site maps.

No significant cold spell had occurred up to the second count, and conditions in both months were mild. Fog hampered observations on 17th January, but many counts were done a week later, when visibility was good.

Results

A total of 88,900 was found in January, and 82,600 in February. In both months a few important areas were not covered. Based on recent winters' results these places are assumed to have held a total of roughly 4,000 Brent in January and 2,500 in February. The actual numbers in Britain are therefore estimated at c.93,000 and 85,000 respectively. Table 1 (overleaf) gives the results, grouped by major sites and areas. The equivalent figures for 1986-87, from last year's January census and monthly wildfowl counts, are shown in brackets (similar for unrecorded areas also being given). The January 1988 estimate slightly exceeds the top end of the range of 60-90,000 predicted for the winter's peak following the near failure of breeding last summer (Salmon 1987). The 1986-87 peak was only slightly higher. This is particularly surprising in view of the mildness of the 1987-88 winter, but may be an example of a phenomenon noted in other wildfowl (e.g. Wigeon in 1982-83 and 1985-86) of an above-average influx being repeated in the year following a hard winter. A short-term "tradition" can apparently be set up in this way. The January 1988 total for France was 58,800, a reduction of 7,000 on 1987. The season's peak was 76,200 in December (R.Maheo).

TABLE 1. NOS. OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN BRITAIN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1988 (and in brackets 1987)

	J A N U A R Y		F E B R U A R Y	
	1988	(1987)	1988	(1987)
Humber	0+	(2200)	0+	(220)+
The Wash	21600	(17100)	21500	(15700)
Norfolk (excl. Wash)	9450	(9800)	7600	(8870)
Minsmere/Alde/Ore	53	(1100)	7	(160)
Deben	480	(800)	300	(2200)
Orwell	960	(840)	890	(700)
Stour	970	(2400)	1400	(1500)
Hamford Water	3000	(8000)	3750	(4000)
Blackwater/Colne	10800	(12600)	10800	(19200)
Dengie	850+	(450)	2600	(580)
Crouch	2500	(5600)	1700	(2400)
Foulness/Canvey	10600	(34)+	5900	(7500)
S.Thames	270+	(220)	x	(340)
Medway	1800+	(2100)	1400+	(2900)
Swale	2600	(880)	70	(2000)
Rest of Kent/Sussex	5	(140)	8	(13)
Pagham	1300	(420)	2600	(2300)
Chichester	8300	(5400)	9700	(10000)
Langstone	6800	(7600)	5500	(5900)
Portsmouth	280	(2000)	1400	(1600)
S'oton/Solent/IOW	5100	(4500)	3100	(4400)
Dorset	400+	(280)	1300	(750)
Exe	750	(870)	1100	(1200)
Rest of Devon/Cornwall	13	(140)	12	(33)
S.Wales	0+	(430)	0+	(570)
Rest	5	(110)	0	(6)
Total	88900	(86000)	82600	(95000)
ESTIMATE	90000	(89200)	85000	(97000)

+ = incomplete

The British peak was apparently earlier in 1987-88 than in the previous two winters, when it was in February. Table 2 shows the change in regional distribution between January and February 1988. A slight relative increase on the south coast is evident, suggesting that birds left that area for the Continent later than they left the Thames basin estuaries. In 1987 (the figures in brackets) there was an influx from the Continent between the January and February counts, concentrated mainly in Essex and Kent.

TABLE 2. THE PROPORTION OF THE TOTAL COUNT OF DARK-BELLIED BRENT GEESE IN EACH REGION, JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 1988 (and in brackets 1987)

	JANUARY	FEBRUARY
Lincs/Norfolk	34.9 (33.1)	35.2 (26.1)
Suffolk/Essex/Kent	39.2 (42.6)	34.9 (45.8)
South coast	25.8 (24.2)	30.0 (28.1)

An enormous amount of data were collected on the usage of sites by geese. Of the 77 sites covered, such information was recorded for 47. Birds were feeding on saltmarsh at 34 of them (23 ungrazed, 7 grazed, 4 unspecified), on mudflats at 27 (11 Enteromorpha, 9 Zostera, 7 unspecified), winter cereal at 16, improved grassland 13, sprouting oil-seed rape 3, sugar beet 1.

Although renowned for their tolerance of Man, items that cause disturbance to Brent were noted at 38 localities. Walkers were specified as a disturbance factor at 15 sites, watersports at 11, wildfowling at 10, aircraft at 7, baitdiggers at 6, cars at 2 and fishermen at 1. Geese were deliberately scared by farmers at 12. At one site Brent were said to have already abandoned feeding inside the sea-wall because of scaring. Otherwise very few changes in either feeding habits or agricultural practice in recent years were noted.

Observers were asked to record the number of young. Although this was a more opportunistic exercise than in the sample autumn age counts, resultant overall figures of 2.3% young in January and 1.9% in February suggest that there was no late influx of families to alter the earlier impressions of a poor breeding season in 1987.

Reference

Salmon, D.G. 1987. Verification of Dark-bellied Brent Geese breeding success 1987. Unpubl. Wildfowl Trust report to NCC.

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