

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESSE IN BRITAIN

5th/10th November 1974

The fifteenth annual autumn census of Greylag Anser anser and Pink-footed Geese A. brachyrhynchus was held over the weekend of 9th/10th November 1974. Compared with 1973 the number of Greylags has fallen by 7,000 to 69,000 and the number of Pinkfeet has increased by 7,000 to 89,000.

The numbers of geese found roosting in each county are set out in the table below together with comparable totals for 1972 and 1973. The totals for each county are rounded to the nearest ten, while the national totals are rounded to the nearest 1,000. Feral flocks of Greylags have been omitted where possible.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	5 Nov 1972	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974	5 Nov 1972	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974
Orkney	20	-	-	-	-	-
Caithness	200	320	1070	-	-	-
Sutherland	-	50	-	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	1210	2300	2270	-	-	180
Inverness	460	10	820	-	-	-
Nairn, Moray	1520	870	1850	-	-	-
Aberdeen	9790	10740	5170	5500	8900	13710
Angus, Kincardine	5300	9360	11140	10090	5600	8740
Perth	29750	35990	29530	16880	33580	24420
Fife	1360	470	200	7680	4300	4710
Kinross	2300	2350	3700	4650	5200	7250
Stirling	-	10	-	-	-	-
Dunbarton	800	600	2000	-	-	-
Lanark	400	100	70	3820	1750	1000
Midlothian	940	530	330	6960	1400	3300
East Lothian	220	10	30	1600	3010	3000
Berwick	310	620	400	4400	750	2250
Peebles	1600	450	-	5350	6440	5500
Roxburgh	1070	1800	2440	10	-	-
Argyll	1440	870	1430	-	-	-
Bute	1120	2720	1120	-	-	-
Ayr	170	250	-	-	-	-
Wigtown	2020	1380	1640	-	-	-
Kirkcudbright	2340	1180	1100	-	-	-
Dumfries	440	500	700	540	280	1700
Northumberland	1380	1150	480	-	-	-
Cumbria	1850	1570	1800	-	-	160
Lancashire	-	-	-	4100	9800	11980
Humberside	-	-	-	1100	1000	450
Lincolnshire	-	-	-	-	300	740
BRITISH TOTAL	68000	76000	69000	73000	82000	89000

Weather and general conditions

Saturday 9th November was not a good counting day, with strong to gale force winds and periods of heavy rain. Fortunately Sunday 10th was better at least in the morning and most counters doing dawn flights that day reported satisfactory conditions, which however deteriorated from the west during the afternoon.

The wet weather of the weeks preceding the count had produced flooding in several low-lying areas which, as usual, were made use of as temporary roosts by Greylags. The ever-onward march of gas and oil pipelines, particularly those from Aberdeenshire to central Scotland also produced abnormal goose distribution in some localities where the pipeline route crossed traditional feeding areas. Greylags were more affected than Pinkfeet.

GREYLAGS

The decrease of 7,000 to 69,000, if genuine, is a little unexpected. Some factors that may have influenced the count have already been mentioned. However it should also be remembered that although these annual censuses cover virtually all the known roosts and feeding areas for the species there is bound to be a counting error, probably lying between 5 and 10%. Changes in the total of less than 10% must be regarded with caution until further counts enable us to decide whether there is a trend developing.

The breeding success in 1974, measured by ageing samples totalling 1,400 birds, was 18.8% with a mean brood size of 2.2. These are a little below average and might have been expected to lead to a small decrease in numbers.

PINKFEET

Changes in the populations of the two Icelandic breeding grey geese are generally synchronised but this year an apparent fall in the number of Greylags is matched by a rise in the total of Pinkfeet, by 7,000 to 89,000, a new record. The breeding success, on a sample of over 2,100 birds, was below average at 17.6% with a mean brood size of 2.2. The remarks on counting error given under Greylags apply here with the additional factor that Pinkfeet occur in rather larger flocks and there may therefore sometimes be a greater counting error.

The distribution of Pinkfeet within the country was unusual with very large numbers in both the north (Aberdeenshire) and south (Lancashire) of the range, and lower than average totals in the centre (Perthshire).

PROPOSAL TO PLACE THE GREYLAG AND PINKFOOT ON THE 2nd SCHEDULE

At the end of September 1974, the Secretary of State for Scotland published an announcement that he proposed to make an Order under the Protection of Birds Act 1954 placing the Greylag and the Pinkfoot on the 2nd Schedule in the six counties: Angus, Clackmannan, Fife, Kinross, Perth and Stirling. He did this on the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Bird Protection for Scotland, in response to complaints from farmers and landowners that the geese were causing agricultural damage. The effect of the Order would be to make the two species pests, liable to be shot at any time instead of only during the normal shooting season. Objections were invited in the period before the Order was to become effective.

Vigorous protests were made to the Secretary of State by a wide variety of bodies and also by individuals. The International Conference on the Conservation of Wetlands and Waterfowl, held in Germany in December 1974 and attended by the representatives of 39 nations, adopted a Recommendation that strongly urged the Secretary of State to reconsider his proposal, pointing out that the conservation and management of geese was an international matter, that many other countries with far larger numbers of geese on farmland had been able to cope with similar problems without recourse to declaring the birds pests, that the farmers concerned already had the right under the 1954 Act to shoot the geese out of season in order to protect their crops, and that new scaring devices had been shown to be effective.

Letters of objection were sent by the main conservation organisations in Britain, including the Wildfowl Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, while the Wildfowling Association of Great Britain and Ireland objected strongly, as did a number of local Wildfowling Clubs. Their general theme was the same; the proposed Order was far too drastic and likely to have far-reaching effects out of all proportion to the problem that it was meant to solve.

For a long time after receiving this storm of protest nothing was heard from the Secretary of State. Finally in the middle of May 1975 the objecting bodies received a letter stating that in view of the number and strength of the objections received, the Advisory Committee had reversed its earlier advice and that the Secretary of State had agreed that the proposed Order should not be made. It has been decided instead to set up a working party including representatives of the

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland, the farmers, conservationists, and shooters, to examine the question of damage, on what scale it occurs, and how best to prevent or alleviate it. The desire is to have some recommendations before the geese arrive next autumn which, one hopes, will be both helpful and more suited to solving the problem. It is a cause for considerable satisfaction that for once a conservation protest has been listened to and the threatened action stopped.

It is of interest in the context of the proposed Order to look at the distribution of geese between the six counties mentioned in the proposed Order. The Table below shows the actual count made in November of each of the last three years together with the percentage of the total population that this represents.

Table. Numbers of percentages of total count of Greylags and Pinkfeet in six counties in Scotland, in November 1972-1974.

County	GREYLAG						PINKFEET					
	1972		1973		1974		1972		1973		1974	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Angus	5330	7.8	5360	12.3	11140	16.1	10090	13.8	5600	6.8	8740	9.8
Perth	29750	43.8	35990	47.4	29530	42.8	16980	23.3	33580	41.0	24420	27.4
Fife	1360	2.0	470	0.1	200	0.3	7620	10.5	4300	5.2	4710	5.3
Kinross	2300	3.4	2350	3.1	3700	5.4	4650	6.4	5200	6.3	7250	8.2
Stirling	-	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Clackmannan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note 1. The figures for Angus will include very small numbers of geese, mainly Greylags, in Kincardineshire.

Note 2. These figures are for the numbers roosting in each county. Feeding sometimes takes place in adjacent counties. Even allowing for this the numbers of grey geese to be found in either Stirling or Clackmannan are always very small in November. They increase during the winter but rarely total more than a few thousands.

POISONING OF GESE

While one threat to the grey geese was being countered, another was appearing. In October/November 1971 up to 500 Greylags had died in an area of Perthshire after feeding on newly-sown grain dressed with an organophosphorous insecticide. This seemed to be an isolated incident and no further cases were reported in that or succeeding winters. Then in winter 1974-75 there were four cases involving Greylags in Scotland, either in Angus or Perthshire, and one in England, Humberside, when Pinkfeet were poisoned. The largest Greylag incident killed between 300 and 400 birds, the other three killed at least 120 between them. The number of Pinkfeet killed on the Humber cannot accurately be determined as many of the poisoned birds died on their roost on the tidal river. However it is known not to be less than 250 and may have been double that. The seed dressing concerned was the same in each case and the same as in 1971. It is widely used to combat wheat bulb fly and appears to be more toxic to wild geese than to many other forms of wildlife. Following these recent incidents it has been recommended that further tests are carried out on the insecticide. Full account of the incidents will be appearing in Wildfowl 25, due out in November 1975.

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I apologise for the extremely late issue of this report. When it was initially prepared early in the New Year we were led to believe that an announcement from the Secretary of State concerning his proposed Order was imminent. Misguidedly I believed this and held off issuing the report until we heard. This position was maintained for the next four and a half months before we finally heard on May 23rd.

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