

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE IN BRITAIN

8th/9th November 1975

The sixteenth annual autumn census of Greylag Anser anser and Pink-footed Geese A. brachyrhynchus took place on the weekend of 8th/9th November 1975. In comparison with 1974 the numbers of both species have fallen, the Greylags by 6,000 to 63,000, and the Pinkfeet by 16,000 to 73,000.

The numbers of geese found roosting in each county of Scotland and England are set out in the table below together with the comparable figures for 1973 and 1974. The table overleaf shows the same figures for the new regions and districts of Scotland. The subtotals are rounded to the nearest ten while the national totals are rounded to the nearest 1,000. Feral or indigenous flocks of Greylags have been omitted where possible.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974	9 Nov 1975	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974	9 Nov 1975
Caithness	320	1070	5000	-	-	-
Sutherland	50	-	-	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	2300	2270	6240	-	180	250
Inverness	10	820	1450	-	-	-
Nairn, Moray	870	1850	2760	-	-	100
Aberdeen	10740	5170	11440	8900	13710	16830
Angus, Kincardine	9360	11140	4900	5600	8740	10520
Perth	35990	29530	12200	33580	24420	11760
Fife	470	200	440	4300	4710	1570
Kinross	2350	3700	3400	5200	7250	5600
Stirling	10	-	-	-	-	-
Dunbarton	600	2000	600	-	-	-
Lanark	100	70	350	1750	1000	1100
Midlothian	530	330	180	1400	3300	220
East Lothian	10	30	150	3010	3000	3500
Berwick	620	400	580	750	2250	1200
Peebles	450	-	-	6440	5500	3760
Roxburgh	1800	2440	2200	-	-	-
Argyll	870	1430	1770	-	-	-
Bute	2720	1120	2220	-	-	-
Ayr	250	-	120	-	-	-
Wigtown	1380	1640	1920	-	-	-
Kirkcudbright	1180	1100	1290	-	-	-
Dumfries	500	700	700	280	1700	1710
Northumberland	1150	480	2280	-	-	40
Cumbria	1570	1800	800	-	160	240
Lancashire	-	-	-	9800	11980	13890
Humberside	-	-	-	1000	450	-
Lincolnshire & Norfolk	-	-	-	300	740	960
BRITISH TOTAL	76000	69000	63000	82000	89000	73000

Weather and general conditions

The weather over the weekend was pleasantly calm and clear in most areas but fog hindered counting in a few parts of eastern Scotland. Fortunately counters at the few major haunts affected were able to check their figures on subsequent days and I am grateful to them for their extra efforts.

There was virtually no spilt grain on the stubble fields of eastern Scotland this autumn, indeed the entire harvest was both early and light. This coupled with

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974	9 Nov 1975	4 Nov 1973	10 Nov 1974	9 Nov 1975
Highland						
Caithness	320	1070	5000	-	-	-
Sutherland	50	-	-	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	2300	2270	6240	-	180	250
Inverness	-	820	500	-	-	-
Badenoch & Strathspey	10	-	950	-	-	-
Nairn	-	70	1010	-	-	-
Grampian						
Moray	870	1780	1750	-	-	100
Banff & Buchan	4000	1900	9500	5500	1750	6500
Gordon	6740	3270	1940	3400	11960	10330
Kincardine & Deeside	-	800	1400	-	-	-
Tayside						
Angus	9360	10340	3500	5600	8740	10520
Perth & Kinross	38000	32680	13370	37580	27940	14730
Central						
Stirling	350	550	2230	1200	3730	2630
Fife	470	200	440	4300	4710	1570
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	3490	2530	3930	-	-	-
Cunningham	100	20	60	-	-	-
Renfrew	10	-	-	-	-	-
Dumbarton	600	2000	600	-	-	-
Strathkelvin	110	50	330	-	-	-
Lanark	-	-	20	1750	1000	1100
Kyle & Carrick	250	-	120	-	-	-
Lothian						
West Lothian	470	230	160	10	300	10
Midlothian	60	90	20	1390	3000	210
City of Edinburgh	-	10	-	-	-	-
East Lothian	10	30	150	3010	3000	3500
Borders						
Tweeddale	450	-	-	6440	5500	3760
Berwickshire	620	400	580	750	2250	1200
Roxburgh	1800	2440	2200	-	-	-
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	1380	1640	1920	-	-	-
Stewartry	1180	1100	1290	40	-	-
Nithsdale	250	680	700	280	1700	1710
Annandale & Eskdale	250	20	-	-	-	-
Northumberland	1150	480	2280	-	-	40
Cumbria	1570	1800	800	-	160	240
Lancashire	-	-	-	9800	11630	13890
Humberside	-	-	-	1000	450	-
Lincolnshire & Norfolk	-	-	-	310	740	960
BRITISH TOTAL	76000	69000	63000	82000	89000	73000

the unusually early arrival of the bulk of the Pinkfeet predictably led to an early November distribution of the geese very different from normal. It was very reasonably suggested that the census should be brought forward a week to try to overcome the problems that this would produce. However I decided that there was at least as much interest in monitoring the distribution of the birds at the same time of year as

usual as there was in trying to 'catch up' on their early arrival and subsequent dispersal. The main danger of holding an earlier census is that not all the Greylags will have arrived from Iceland, as they traditionally do not complete their migration until the beginning of November. In the event I think that the census went well and that we have managed to get a relatively accurate picture both of numbers and distribution in this unusual season. I have recently been in correspondence with an observer living on Skye and was most surprised to learn that he saw skeins of several hundred Pinkfeet moving south over the island on 4th and 5th November. This is an extremely late date for Pinkfeet to be arriving. They were moving in company with far larger numbers of Barnacle Geese, which were seen to arrive in force on those two days on the island of Islay, at least two weeks later than usual. The explanation seems to lie in the two to three week period of persistent southerly winds that prevailed in the latter half of October and which prevented these Greenland breeding birds from leaving their traditional stopping off place in northern Iceland. One must assume that the Pinkfeet, too, were of Greenland origin.

GREYLAGS

The population has decreased for the second year running, by 6,000 to 63,000, the lowest total since 1969. The very obvious reason for this year's drop is that 1975 was the second worst breeding season for Greylags since our monitoring of annual production started in 1958. The percentage of young birds found in a sample of 1,811 examined was only 7.6% with a mean brood size from 92 broods of 1.51. Only 1968 when the figure was 6.0% has been poorer while the average over the period 1958-1975 is 23.8%. The mean annual mortality rate in recent years has been about 19% so it is hardly surprising that there has been a decrease in numbers. Indeed one might have expected a slightly larger drop from such poor production, which tends to confirm the feeling expressed in the report on the 1974 census that the rather difficult conditions that year may have led to an underestimate.

PINKFEET

The summer of 1975 was easily the worst breeding season for the Pinkfeet in Iceland since our records started, which they did for this species in 1950. There were only 5.6% young birds in a sample of 1,577, while the mean brood size from 60 broods was 1.43. The population has dropped sharply by 16,000 to 73,000 or back to the level of 1972, before the increases of the last two years. Such a decrease is slightly more than expected from the average annual mortality rate of about 18% but lies well within the scope of annual variations in the rate.

The very poor breeding by both grey geese in Iceland will have been caused by the cold, wet summer experienced there. Britain was fortunate in having one of its best summers for many years, brought about by a high pressure area sitting over the country for nearly three months from early June. The track of the Atlantic depressions was pushed further north than usual to take them close to Iceland, bringing with them the kind of weather conditions of low temperatures and high precipitation that will cause the maximum mortality of goose eggs and young. In general the geese nesting in sub-arctic Iceland do not have the wide fluctuations in breeding success experienced by high arctic species such as the Brent. It is nevertheless salutary to be reminded that they can suffer nearly complete breeding failures and that the apparently inexorable increases in numbers over recent years can quickly and strikingly be reversed.

Regional distribution

The very different distribution revealed by this November's census is best illustrated by means of percentages for the various regions (geographical not administrative). The table overleaf divides the country into five regions and shows the comparative figures for the last three years. The East Central Scotland region

corresponds to the old counties of Angus, Perth, Fife, Kinross, Stirling and Clackmannan. It will be recalled that it was for these six counties that it was proposed to place both grey geese on the 'Pest' Schedule of the Protection of Birds Act, thus allowing them to be shot at any time. This proposal has now been dropped and instead a Working Party representing all interests is examining other methods of reducing conflict between the geese and agriculture.

Table. Regional distribution of Greylags and Pinkfeet in November 1973-1975.

Figures are percentages of the total population.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	1973	1974	1975	1973	1974	1975
North Scotland	18.7	16.1	42.7	10.7	15.6	23.4
East Central Scotland	64.0	64.5	33.2	59.3	50.7	40.3
South-east Scotland	4.6	4.7	5.5	16.3	16.9	13.4
South-west Scotland	9.1	11.4	13.7	0.3	1.9	2.3
England	3.6	3.3	4.9	13.4	14.9	20.6

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to all the following for their help with the census and to any whose names are inadvertently omitted:

A. Allison, P.L. Atkinson, R. Baillie, J. Ballantyne, B.W. Barker, J.A.G. Barnes, W.M. Barr, Dr. Bewsher, Mr. and Mrs. Binny, T. Black, T. Boyd, F. Brady, W. Brotherston, A. Brown, H. Brown, R.A. Cadman, R. Calligan, E.D. Cameron, C.R.G. Campbell, A. Chapman, P.N. Clark, Capt. I.P. Coats, J.A. Coats, R. Cockburn, L.T. Colley, C.N.L. Cowper, S. Da Prato, A. Dewar, G. Dick, R.C. Dickson, J. Dunbar, J. Teifer Dunbar, H. Duncan, C.E. Macduff-Duncan, Mrs. M.K. Macduff-Duncan, M.H. Dunn, J. Ellwood, Sir Robert Erskine-Hill, P.G.H. Evans, A. Ferguson, W. Fiddler, Dr. I.W. Fingland, P. Fisher, C.A. Gervaise, Mrs. J.A.R. Grant, H. Gray, H.C. Gray, J.F.D. Hargreaves, R. Hastings, C.G. Headlam, A. Henderson, T.W. Henderson, A. Henry, M. Heubeck, P.J.O. Higgins, P. Hockey, W.G. Hughes, Mr. and Mrs. J.B. Hutchison, M. Jacques, Dr. D. Jenkins, T. John, P. Johnson, I.R. Johnston, J. Kirk, Mr. and Mrs. J. Kirk, Miss S. Laing, Mrs. S. Laing, Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Lister, W.J. McCulloch, D. McDonald, Mrs. I.M. McKinnie, K.J. MacLeod, R.L. McMillan, J. McNish, W. McWilliam, J. Mann, R.P. Mason, A. Mathieson, J. Maxwell, Maj. M.I. Leslie Melville, T.D.H. Merrie, D. Millican, A.B. Mitchell, M. Nelson, S. Nendick, R. Nisbet, Mrs. M. Notman, R.C. Notman, M. Nugent, D.A. O'Connor, Mrs. C.C. Ogilvie, G. Ogilvie, R.E.M. Pilcher, Mrs. D.H. Rainier, Dr. R. Richter, J. Ridgeway, Mrs. Roberts, W. Russell, J. Ruxton, I.B. Scott, R. Shaw, Miss W. Simpson, R.W.J. Smith, D.M. Stark, A.G. Stewart, I.D.L. Thomson, M. Thorpe, L.A. Urquhart, L. Vick, R. Walker, J.H. Wallace, R. Walls, A.D. Watson, R. Wells, R.B. Wilkinson, J. Young, J.F. Young, L. Young, B. Zonfrillo.

M.A. Ogilvie,
Wildfowl Trust,
Slimbridge,
Gloucester,
GL2 7BT.

11th February, 1976.