

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE IN BRITAIN

8th/9th November 1969

A census held on the weekend 8th/9th November showed that about 62,000 Greylags Anser anser anser and about 74,000 Pink-footed Geese Anser brachyrhynchus were present in Scotland and England. The number of Greylags is not significantly higher than in November 1968 while the Pinkfeet have shown a definite increase.

The totals of both species found roosting in each county are given in the table below, together with the results for November 1968 for comparison. The county totals are rounded to the nearest ten birds and the national total to the nearest thousand. Feral flocks of Greylags are omitted where possible.

	GREYLAGS		PINKFEET	
	9 Nov 1969	10 Nov 1968	9 Nov 1969	10 Nov 1968
Orkney	30	-	-	-
Caithness	90	390	-	-
Sutherland	-	-	-	-
Ross and Cromarty	1510	2000	250	80
Inverness	620	370	-	-
Nairn, Moray	580	780	-	-
Aberdeen	14730	4810	12810	12200
Angus, Kincardine	9530	8780	11050	2650
Perth	18410	30960	6980	24850
Fife	1150	870	11000	3520
Kinross	1010	1190	3450	1030
Stirling	-	10	10	310
Dumbarton	870	450	10	-
Lanark	450	-	2320	680
Midlothian	3790	1760	5270	4800
East Lothian	10	10	2150	2200
Berwick	1680	520	2500	10
Peebles	30	20	4530	1900
Roxburgh	440	310	-	-
Argyll	1200	1560	-	-
Bute	680	3010	-	-
Ayr	10	150	-	-
Wigtown	2420	820	-	-
Kirkcudbright	1150	720	-	-
Dumfries	330	130	2570	440
Cumberland	900	700	3080	840
Northumberland	480	110	60	-
Westmoreland	-	-	-	150
Lancashire	-	-	5610	7910
Yorkshire	10	-	900	600
Lincolnshire	-	-	430	850
BRITISH TOTAL	62000	61000	74000	65000

Weather conditions

In the nine years of Grey Goose censuses we have experienced just about every type of weather imaginable, but there seems general agreement from the counters that this year the conditions included the worst ever, and these were pretty general over the whole country. A fortunate few counters had moderately good weather, especially on the Sunday, though it was still bitterly cold, but elsewhere and on the Saturday it was nothing short of atrocious. Severe gales lashed much of the country and were liberally mixed with rain sleet and snow showers plus a fair proportion of hail. There was even some fog in one area. The observers' comments on the subject were quite entertaining reading for the organiser but were not the sort of thing one can print.

Naturally enough counting conditions were poor and this should be taken into consideration when assessing the results. Also acting against a satisfactory census was the abnormal distribution of the geese in some areas. The fine summer of 1969 led to an excellent harvest in several parts of the country, notably east-central Scotland, and the barley stubbles contained little spilt grain. This caused the geese to disperse widely in search of food and they were often found only after extensive searching in seldom used localities. There was also a tendency for them to be in smaller flocks than normal.

Having made my excuses I can now say that the results actually obtained were quite satisfactory. Both species showed increases in numbers, which were to be expected from the quite good breeding conditions.

GREYLAGS

After two poor breeding seasons 1969 was a welcome change, even though it was still only moderately successful. Counts in a number of localities showed 21.2% young birds in the flocks with a rather low mean brood size of 1.9. The percentage of young is similar to that in 1965 and 1966 though the brood size is lower. We could have expected a rather larger increase in numbers after such a breeding success, but in addition to the adverse factors already mentioned, there was strong evidence that some birds were still migrating during the census weekend. We can never hope to avoid completely such a late movement.

The table shows how unusual was the distribution in some areas with much reduced numbers in Perthshire and Bute, and great increases in Aberdeenshire and Midlothian.

PINKFEET

The breeding result is similar to that of the Greylag. A moderately good season has produced 24.4% young birds in the flocks with a mean brood size of 2.2. This is a considerable improvement on 1967 and 1968 and a little better than the average for the five years 1962-66.

Enclosed with this report is a reprint of a paper on the status of the Pinkfoot in Britain in the last twenty years. It is based on the November

censuses together with earlier incomplete counts. The paper further tries to predict what may happen in the future and gives two possible ways in which the population may be going to change. One course follows the general upward trend of the last twenty years, to a possible 90,000 by 1975. An alternative is a decline based on the drop in totals in November 1967 and 1968. The paper specifies "If population in November 1969 equals or exceeds 775,000 the long term growth rate will have been restored. Should the 1969 total fall appreciably below 65,000, the predictor of growth must be abandoned and a new estimate of the rate of decline calculated".

The total of 74,000 found this November falls close to the upper prediction line in figure 6 of the paper, and to that extent the first forecast appears to be the more plausible.

At the end of the paper mention is made of a very serious threat hanging over the Thjorsarver oasis in central Iceland, the principal breeding locality for the Pinkfoot. Plans to flood the whole area for a hydro-electric project are being vigorously opposed by the international conservation bodies, as well as by conservationists in Iceland and Britain.

Expeditions to Iceland in the summers of 1966 and 1969 have covered much of the central parts of the country and have confirmed Thjorsarver as holding by far the greater part of the total breeding pairs. They failed to find any other areas where more than a few Pinkfeet breed, thus reinforcing our pessimistic view that if Pinkfeet were displaced from Thjorsarver they would be unable to find alternative breeding sites. It is hoped that further work, including aerial surveys of Thjorsarver, will be carried out in the summer of 1970.

The future therefore is not bright and although the temporary decline of the past two years has been firmly reversed, the long term prospects do not favour a continued increase.

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