

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE IN BRITAIN

7th/8th November 1970

The annual autumn census held over the weekend 7th/8th November 1970 revealed that about 65,000 Greylag Geese Anser anser anser and about 72,000 Pink-footed Geese Anser brachyrhynchus were present in Scotland and England. There has been a slight increase in the number of Greylags compared with November 1969, while the Pinkfeet have decreased a little.

The table gives the numbers of both species found roosting in each county, together with the results for November 1969 for comparison. The county totals are rounded to the nearest ten, the national totals to the nearest thousand. Where possible feral flocks of Greylags are omitted.

	GREYLAGS		PINKFEET	
	8th Nov. 1970	9th Nov. 1969	8th Nov. 1970	9th Nov. 1969
Orkney	-	30	-	-
Caithness	200	90	-	-
Highland	-	-	-	-
Ross and Cromarty	1230	1510	30	-
Inverness	50	620	-	-
Nairn, Moray	590	580	-	-
Aberdeen	6410	14730	2230	12810
Angus, Kincardine	10530	9530	3470	10150
Perth	28750	18410	34360	6980
Fife	520	1150	5570	11000
Kinross	1700	1010	4610	3450
Stirling	10	-	100	10
Dunbarton	800	870	10	10
Lanark	370	450	1320	2320
Midlothian	3130	3790	3670	5270
East Lothian	-	10	800	2150
Berwick	300	1680	4000	2500
Peebles	310	30	3320	4530
Roxburgh	650	440	-	-
Argyll	890	1200	-	-
Bute	1150	680	-	-
Ayr	100	10	-	-
Wigtown	3030	2420	60	-
Kirkcudbright	1640	1150	340	-
Dumfries	900	330	2760	2570
Cumberland	940	900	1030	3080
Northumberland	480	480	10	60
Westmorland	20	-	200	-
Lancashire	-	-	3410	5610
Yorkshire	-	10	480	900
Lincolnshire	-	-	130	430
BRITISH TOTAL	65000	62000	72000	74000

Weather conditions

Although not so memorably bad as last year the weather was by no means kind. Counters out on the Saturday met with

generally good conditions at first with clear skies and light winds, but a deterioration set in during the afternoon and by the Sunday morning there were strong to gale force winds almost everywhere accompanied by heavy rain squalls. In places these merged to give a very wet day indeed. Except when it was raining, visibility was mostly good. The heavy rain of the previous weeks had produced flooding in several areas by the time of the census but fortunately rather few geese had been tempted away from their permanent roosts by these transient wetlands.

GREYLAG

A further slight increase in the population has taken place following a moderately good breeding season. There were 25.1% young birds in the flocks, the best since 1964. The average brood size of 2.4 is also an improvement on recent years.

The distribution within Britain is rather different from that in November 1969 but quite similar to that in the preceding three years. The table shows the percentage of the total population present in each of five broad regions for the last five years. The distribution pattern in early November appears to reflect with some accuracy the quality of the grain harvest in East Central Scotland, which includes Perth, Angus, Fife and Kinross. In each of the years except 1969 there was considerable spillage of grain, some fields of barley left uncut, and much sprouting from the ear. This abundance of food enables the geese to concentrate in the area and delay their subsequent onward movement. In 1969 there was a comparatively early and clean harvest in East Central Scotland resulting in a more rapid dispersal of the geese.

Regional distribution of Greylags in November, 1966-1970.
Figures are percentages of the total population.

	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
North Scotland	14.5	13.8	13.9	28.3	13.1
East Central Scotland	65.8	69.4	69.6	49.9	65.3
South-east Scotland	2.8	4.9	4.4	10.3	7.4
South-west Scotland	16.0	11.2	10.7	9.3	12.0
England	0.9	0.7	1.4	2.2	2.2

PINKFEET

The small drop in numbers is probably not significant. It follows an average breeding season with 23.1% young birds in the flocks, and a mean brood size of 2.2. In order to obtain these production figures sample counts were made in flocks in several different wintering areas.

The Pinkfeet are affected by the East Central Scotland harvest in the same way as the Greylags and this is reflected in the table of regional distribution. However a marked variation from the usual pattern took place this year with notably few birds in Aberdeenshire, which is included in North Scotland. The 'missing' birds were clearly in East Central Scotland, rather than any further south. The increase in the proportion of the Pinkfeet to be found in November in East Central and North Scotland, which was very marked in the early 1960s, is clearly continuing, if at a slower rate, and with the exception of the clean harvest year of 1969.

Regional distribution of Pinkfeet in November, 1966-1970.
Figures are percentages of the total population.

	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
North Scotland	21.2	22.8	19.1	17.4	3.1
East Central Scotland	46.0	43.7	49.7	42.8	66.9
South-east Scotland	18.1	24.7	14.7	22.7	18.3
South-west Scotland	5.2	1.7	0.6	3.5	4.4
England	9.5	7.1	15.9	13.6	7.3

In the Report on the census of November 1969 mention was made of the proposed hydro-electric scheme to flood the principal breeding locality of the Pinkfeet in Iceland. An aerial survey was carried out in June 1970 to establish how many pairs of Pinkfeet were breeding in the threatened area, known as Thjorsarver, and what proportion of the total this represented. The results of the survey showed that there were about 10,500 pairs nesting in Thjorsarver. It is thought that a further 3,500 pairs are scattered thinly in central Iceland and in East Greenland. The doubling of the population in the last twenty years has been matched by a corresponding increase in the breeding population of Thjorsarver. Some other areas of central Iceland which held small numbers of pairs in the 1950s and which have been surveyed in the last few years have not shown any change.

The production figures obtained each November in Britain enable one to calculate the numbers of pairs which have young with them then. This is done by dividing the number of young birds in the population by the average brood size. Thus this year there were 23.1% young representing about 16,600 birds. The average brood size was 2.2, therefore the number of broods, and thus the number of pairs with young, was about 7,500. For the first time ever this figure can be related to the number of pairs that are thought to have nested. The latter is estimated at 14,000, of which three-quarters were covered by the aerial survey. Almost half the pairs had therefore lost all their eggs or young by November. The chief causes will have been predation and weather losses of eggs and young on the breeding grounds, losses on migration to Scotland, and shooting on the wintering grounds prior to the census.

It is not possible to say whether such a proportionate loss is very high, or low, or about normal, as there are no comparable sets of records, whether from the Iceland Pinkfeet or any other population of migratory geese. We know from production counts that in recent years the number of pairs with young in November has fluctuated between 5,000 and 8,000, so provided the number of pairs nesting this year was normal, the loss to November may have been about usual as well.

The decision on whether or not Thjorsarver will be flooded is not expected for another year or two. In the meantime research is being undertaken in Iceland to discover what it is about the area which the geese find so attractive and whether these desirable features exist elsewhere. If they do then we can be more optimistic that the geese will move to other sites if displaced from Thjorsarver. At the moment however there is little reason to be cheerful either about the final decision or about the consequences.

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