

GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GESE IN BRITAIN

6th/7th November 1971

About 64,000 Greylag Geese Anser anser and 65,000 Pink-footed Geese Anser brachyrhynchus were counted during the annual autumn census held over the weekend of 6th/7th November 1971. The total of Greylags is very close to that of the previous November, while the number of Pinkfeet has declined somewhat.

The table shows the number of each species roosting in each county, together with the comparable figures for November 1969 and 1970. The county totals are rounded to the nearest ten, while the national totals are rounded to the nearest thousand. Feral flocks of Greylags are omitted where possible.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	9 Nov. 1969	8 Nov. 1970	<u>7 Nov. 1971</u>	9 Nov. 1969	8 Nov. 1970	<u>7 Nov. 1971</u>
Orkney	30	-	-	-	-	-
Caithness	90	200	500	-	-	-
Sutherland	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ross and Cromarty	1510	1230	1710	-	30	-
Inverness	620	50	320	-	-	-
Nairn, Moray	580	590	530	-	-	-
Aberdeen	14730	6410	9370	12810	2230	3670
Angus, Kincardine	9530	10530	8660	10150	3470	11380
Perth	18410	28750	22320	6980	34360	9640
Fife	1150	520	3040	11000	5570	7980
Kinross	1010	1700	2520	3450	4610	4030
Stirling	-	10	-	10	100	420
Dunbarton	870	800	800	10	10	-
Lanark	450	370	570	2320	1320	1230
Midlothian	3790	5130	-	5270	3670	7600
East Lothian	10	-	1210	2150	800	1600
Berwick	1680	300	435	2500	4000	4800
Peebles	30	310	360	4530	3320	2820
Roxburgh	440	650	930	-	-	-
Argyll	1200	890	1700	-	-	-
Bute	680	1150	1640	-	-	-
Ayr	10	100	370	-	-	-
Wigtown	2420	3030	2720	-	60	-
Kirkcudbright	1150	1640	1900	-	340	80
Dumfries	330	900	630	2570	2760	1900
Cumberland	900	940	710	3080	1030	470
Northumberland	480	480	760	60	10	-
Westmorland	-	20	80	-	200	370
Lancashire	-	-	-	5610	3410	5940
Yorkshire	10	-	-	900	480	1000
Lincolnshire	-	-	-	430	130	50
BRITISH TOTAL	62000	65000	<u>64000</u>	74000	72000	<u>65000</u>

Weather and general conditions

Strong northerly winds covered most of the country on both days with intermittent squalls of rain and hail. After a clear night on 5th/6th which led in some areas to the geese staying out for the

night under the moon, the all important night of 6th/7th was generally overcast. This fortunate occurrence means that the counts at the evening and, particularly, morning flight of that night will have been reasonably complete. Visibility was everywhere good, except during squalls.

One major factor which must be taken into account when assessing the results of the census is the exceptionally early and clean grain harvest over most of Scotland. It was especially so in the very important areas of east central Scotland. Here there were hardly any geese to be found feeding on stubbles and the proportion of such fields already ploughed was high. Instead the birds were on harvested potato fields, not usually available in early November, or on grass. Such a shortage of the normal autumn foods last occurred in 1969 and led, as this year, to an abnormal distribution of the geese. In conditions such as these it is always possible that the census network of counters, designed to produce optimum results in normal seasons, may have missed some birds. Against this is the unlikelihood of the geese, especially Pinkfeet, pioneering new sites as roosts, though there is considerable evidence from this census that they used new feeding areas whilst operating from traditional roosts.

GREYLAGS

The drop in numbers from November 1970 is not significant. The distribution was not so different from that of 1970 and this species seems to have been less affected by the food shortage than the Pinkfeet. There are, however, certain similarities with 1969, notably the larger numbers in Aberdeenshire, Fife and Kinross, and the smaller numbers in Perth and Angus.

Just over 1,600 birds were sampled for breeding success data from several different localities. There were 17.5% young birds present with a mean brood size of 1.8. These are both below the long term average and will have contributed to the unchanged total numbers.

PINKFEET

This is the first season since 1967 showing a large decline in Pinkfoot numbers and it is difficult to offer an explanation. Age ratio samples from over 1,700 birds showed that there were 22.2% young birds in the flocks, which is close to the average, though the mean brood size was very low at 1.9. Incidentally this last figure compares with a mean of 2.3 measured on the Thjorsarver, Iceland, breeding grounds in late summer (A. Gardarsson, pers.comm.).

The effect on the Pinkfeet of the abnormal harvest conditions in east central Scotland was much more noticeable than in the case of the Greylags. The comparison with 1970 and 1969 in the table shows this well. However there were clear differences as well as similarities in the distribution patterns for 1969 and 1971. In both seasons there were extremely marked reductions in the numbers in Perth and corresponding increases in Angus and in the Lothians and neighbouring counties. In the latter area the count of Pinkfeet was among the highest ever. A major difference between 1971 and 1969 was that the number of geese present in Aberdeenshire was hardly larger than normal. Elsewhere there were indications

that the geese had moved south earlier than usual with good counts in Lancashire.

As already mentioned it seems unlikely that any Pinkfeet would have moved into a completely new area, though quite possible, in view of their tendency to fly up to 20 miles from roost to feeding area, that some new localities for the latter may have been used and gone undetected. In those parts where the geese are counted as they flight to or from their roost this should not have been a problem but where the counting has to be done on the ground during the daytime there will always remain the chance of some being missed.

Enclosed with this report is a reprint of a paper just published in Wildfowl 22. It deals in detail with the helicopter survey of the Thjorsarver breeding grounds in central Iceland of the Pinkfeet, and summarises our existing state of knowledge concerning the breeding distribution and numbers elsewhere in Iceland, and in East Greenland. It then briefly reviews the prospects and possibilities for research in Iceland.

Since the paper was completed, last May, some further developments have taken place affecting the Pinkfeet and the proposed flooding of Thjorsarver. The Iceland Government has already provided £20,000 and £10,000 p.a. is expected for three to four years for ecological research in Thjorsarver. Every aspect of the ecosystem, including the geese, will be investigated. This is a commendably large sum of money by any biological research standards, and especially so for a country of only 200,000 inhabitants. The programme involves six Icelandic research workers but there is much more work to be done. Moves are now being made to raise further sums of money, and to find specialist scientists from abroad. Britain, who benefits most from Iceland-reared geese, should surely contribute in some way.

There appears to be a breathing space of several years in which to accomplish research. The delay of any flooding is welcome, but the ultimate intention to flood has not been rescinded. The Icelandic Government have clearly taken note of the many protests by conservationists concerning the hydro-electric proposals that threaten Thjorsarver and have instituted this major research programme. Hopefully it will result in such a clear statement as to the value and uniqueness of the ecosystem that the proposal will finally be dropped.

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