

## GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE IN BRITAIN

20th/21st March 1982

The first spring census of Greylag Anser anser and Pink-footed Geese A.brachyrhynchus since 1967 was held over the weekend of 20th/21st March 1982. Totals of 52,000 Greylags and 70,000 Pinkfeet were found. This compares with November 1981 totals of 96,000 and 90,000 respectively. Because of the dispersed nature of the geese, especially the Greylags, in the spring, it is not thought that these figures represent the total population of either species.

The numbers of geese found roosting in each region and district of Scotland, and each county of England, are set out in the table below, together with the figures for November 1981. The individual totals have been rounded to the nearest 10, while the national totals are rounded to the nearest 1000. Where identifiable, feral or indigenous flocks of Greylags have been omitted.

	GREYLAGS		PINKFEET	
	8 Nov 1981	21 Mar 1982	8 Nov 1981	21 Mar 1982
Orkney	160	220	-	-
Highland				
Caithness	4300	1530	-	20
Sutherland	-	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	27400	810	-	2760
Inverness	5300	1500	-	500
Nairn	10	310	-	-
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	-
Grampian				
Moray	1580	2770	-	-
Banff & Buchan	4750	7250	5900	900
Gordon	6440	4430	7300	7950
Kincardine & Deeside	3980	500	-	30
Tayside				
Angus	2950	1220	3400	3920
Perth & Kinross	15030	7730	15530	14460
Central				
Stirling	1080	5240	2500	5500
Fife	2250	260	6150	2500
Strathclyde				
Argyll & Bute	2790	2620	-	-
Cunningham	150	190	-	-
Renfrew	140	-	-	-
Dumbarton	250	300	-	-
Strathkelvin	40	90	-	-
Lanark	-	160	940	680
Kyle & Carrick	460	840	-	-
Lothian				
Midlothian/West Lothian	2370	160	8730	5150
East Lothian	840	400	4510	20
Borders				
Tweeddale	10	-	12340	460
Berwickshire	820	-	1000	1800
Roxburgh	3950	1200	440	-
Dumfries & Galloway				
Wigtown	2190	3180	160	8300
Stewartry	740	2070	-	50
Nithsdale	310	1340	2210	8600

	GREYLAGS		PINKFEET	
	8 Nov 1981	21 Mar 1982	8 Nov 1981	21 Mar 1982
Northumberland	4130	4900	-	-
Cumbria	1300	620	20	1790
Lancashire	-	-	18240	3000
Humberside	-	-	-	70
Lincolnshire/Norfolk	-	-	530	1200
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BRITISH TOTAL	96000	52000	90000	70000
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#### Weather and general conditions

Over most of the country Saturday 20th was a fine day, with clear skies and little wind. Sunday dawned wet and misty, which interfered with some counts, though clearing to better weather in the afternoon. A number of observers reported field roosting and very late evening flights, both of which will have led to under-counting.

#### GREYLAGS

The total found was only about 55% of the November 1981 total, and while there would naturally be some losses through the winter a decline of 45% is altogether much greater than would be expected. Using the annual November censuses it is possible to calculate, fairly accurately, the losses during the twelve-month period between censuses. Each November the percentage of young birds in the flocks is observed and this can then be converted to a total of young in the population; those birds which have been added to the population during the past year. This figure is then deducted from the census total to give the number of survivors since the previous November. A subtraction of these survivors from the census total of the previous November gives a figure for the losses which have occurred in the twelve-month period. Over the last ten years this has averaged only 13.2% of the population, with strong signs of having declined in the last five years. Thus although we suspect that the greater part of the annual losses are sustained during the winter months, and mainly through shooting, this level is substantially below the apparent 45% loss shown through this last winter.

The obvious explanation is that large numbers of birds were missed. There is little doubt that many Greylags give up a regular roosting pattern during the course of the winter, and at the same time the large flocks common in autumn split up into very many smaller ones. These disperse more widely and often roost on small patches of temporary floodwater. Not only do the counts at the traditional roosts not include them, but even extensive ground searches during the day may not locate more than a small proportion. Even so, our failure this time to find perhaps 20,000 or even 30,000 Greylags is both surprising and disappointing. The regional distribution gives few clues as to where the birds might have been. Some substantial shifts have clearly taken place since the November census, reinforced no doubt by the unusually severe weather during December and January. Some of the largest numbers were found in the Central and Tayside regions, where most of the agricultural complaints arise, though mostly the flock size was fairly small.

## PINKFEET

The Pinkfoot total of 70,000 is a drop of 22.3% since November, or only about half the decline shown by the Greylags. This compares with average annual losses, based on the November censuses, of about 12% over the last ten years. Thus the March census was more successful at finding the Pinkfeet than the Greylags. This species, too, does have a more erratic roosting behaviour in the spring than in the autumn but seemingly not to the same extent, or at least not this year. Interestingly in the period 1963-67, the only other time when we have carried out these national grey goose censuses in the spring, the number of Pinkfeet found as a proportion of the previous November's total was consistently less than the number of Greylags.

There were some sizeable concentrations of birds, particularly in the Solway and west of there, around Wigtown Bay. This latter area is a regular spring haunt for Pinkfeet but it is thought that the severe winter weather pushed more birds than usual along there and that many had not yet moved back east and north. There were virtually as many Pinkfeet in the Central and Tayside regions as in November, though the totals at that time were lower than normal. Further south, however, the Lothians and Borders regions had relatively small numbers present.

## Conclusions

We will have to wait until we have the results of the next November census before being certain just what proportion of the expected totals were actually found in March. As mentioned in my note circulated before the census, one of the main reasons for attempting a spring count after a gap of 15 years was to provide information relevant to the provisions of the new Wildlife and Countryside Act which permit the shooting of Greylags and Pinkfeet outside the normal shooting season in order to prevent agricultural damage. This will be done by a system of licences issued by DAFS to individual landowners and farmers. Most of the complaints from farmers relate to the spring, a time when our knowledge of goose distribution is nothing like as good as it is in the autumn, as this census has showed. However it is probable that we have located most if not all the major concentrations, those likely to be a problem, while in future years I hope that some of the gaps can be filled in. There is certainly some evidence that the hard weather during the winter caused unusual movements of the geese and the distribution as we have just found it may well not be typical of a more normal year.

## Effects of the severe weather in 1981-82

I am grateful to the observers who responded to my request for information on the geese during the severe spells of weather last winter. It is apparent that there were some very large movements of birds, the most spectacular result of which was a count in Lancashire on 22nd January of no less than 36,500 Pinkfeet, with nearly 34,000 still there on the 31st. The surprising thing about these counts, apart from their sheer size, is that they occurred after the general thaw of 16th-17th January. On 10th January there were about 21,000 present in January, still a very high count for the time of year, but it does raise the question of where the additional 15,000 or so birds came from. It might be supposed that they were birds returning from somewhere further south. The only other regular haunt to the south of Lancashire is the Wash. Unfortunately there was no mid-January count on the Wash, because of bad weather, and by mid-February numbers were quite low.

Elsewhere there were unusually large numbers of Pinkfeet west

into Galloway, as already mentioned, and of Greylags in Ayrshire. Most haunts in northern and eastern Scotland were, not surprisingly, deserted at the height of the bad weather, though the available information is not sufficient to make it clear where all the birds went.

#### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all the following who took part in the census. Although this spring census failed to find all the geese I shall certainly be requesting your help again next spring. In the meantime the date for the annual autumn census will be the weekend 13th/14th November 1982.

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