

Great Crested Grebe 1931

Title

Great Crested Grebe 1931

Description and Summary of Results

The Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* was probably widespread some centuries ago but, by the second half of the 18th Century, long before the shooting of British specimens had begun, it had become quite scarce. From 1851 onwards there was a considerable killing of grebes in England, primarily for their plumes, and by 1860 there were only about 42 pairs left. The Protection Acts of 1870 to 1880 changed this, and from 1880 onwards continuous colonization took place, although with some annual variation. The increase was also noted across Europe.

The Enquiry of 1931 specifically arose from an ecological study of aquatic birds in Surrey during 1930, and the Great Crested Grebe was chosen partly because of the change in its status over the previous 50 years, but also because it was conspicuous and unmistakable, and occurred only on fair sized lakes which would greatly simplify a detailed study.

As far as possible it was arranged that every stretch of water of over four acres (1.5ha) in England and Wales was visited, and over 1300 observers took part. Every county in England and Wales was covered and some in Scotland, and the published report gives the details and a full history of the species in each.

Between 1154 and 1161 breeding pairs (and 347 non-breeding adults) were found in England and Wales, on 489 sites, and with 138 sites reported as deserted. About 80 pairs were found in Scotland. The spread had in general occurred from east to west.

Other information was collected by the enquiry, both from observers and the literature, and is included in the report. For example: 1) a pair of grebes with young was estimated to take 300-630 lbs (ca 150-300kg) of fish from a lake in one summer; 2) the diet varied a great deal locally, but roach and perch seemed to comprise most of the food, with other fish, insects, crustacea, molluscs, newts, tadpoles and vegetable matter also noted; 3) human interference was thought to be the main cause of recorded deaths (36%), with fish (26% but only of chicks) second; 4) the average number of young raised per pair during 1931 was 1.3. (Note: A form sent in by Max Nicholson covering Hertfordshire notes that he looked at Knebworth Park Lake, found only Dabchick and Moorhen, but that he was thrown off the estate personally by Lord Lytton.)

Methods of Data Capture

Appeals for help were published in daily, evening and local newspapers, weekly and sporting papers, angling and scientific journals, and a special feature in *The Times*. The BBC broadcast an appeal at the beginning of the general news, while *British Birds*, *The Scottish Naturalist* and *The Naturalist* published special articles. Every well-known naturalist and ornithologist, many local observers, taxidermists, town clerks and clergy with lakes in their parishes were contacted directly, as were a great number of landowners with likely lakes on their property.

A questionnaire was sent out to those who responded which asked observers for the exact location of each “water” surveyed, the number of breeding pairs and date counted, the year in which the site was colonised and number of pairs in previous years where known. They were also asked to note any apparently suitable “water” where the species had never bred and to suggest any reasons; any other sites where it had bred in the past; and whether the population appeared to be stable, increasing or decreasing locally. Observers also provided as much supplementary information as they wished: migrations, nests, breeding habits, mortality, non-breeding birds, food habits, territory and relations with other species.

Purpose of Data Capture

The main object was a complete census of breeding Great Crested Grebes in England and Wales, and it was hoped to cover as much of Scotland as possible. Other information requested was the approximate date on which each lake was first colonized, the numbers of pairs in other years, and the history on any lakes once inhabited but now deserted by grebes.

Geographic Coverage

All of Great Britain but primarily England and Wales.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1931.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by Phil Hollom and Tom Harrison with the support of *British Birds* magazine. (1931 was prior to the formation of the BTO but the survey was organised in the same way as became the norm following the formation of the Trust.)

Organiser(s)

Phil A D Hollom and Tom Harrison

Current Staff Contact

archives@bto.org

Publications

The report of the survey was published in four parts and with a fifth specifically relating to Scotland:

Harrison, T.H. & Hollom, P.A.D. 1932. The Great Crested Grebe Enquiry 1931. *British Birds* 26: 62-92; 102-131; 142-155; 174-195; 286-291.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 box containing record cards and 1 box containing letters and data. All have been scanned.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis