

INTERNATIONAL WILDFOWL INQUIRY

FIRST REPORT ON WILDFOWL COUNTS IN BRITISH ISLES Season 1947/48

The wildfowl count, though it cannot achieve its principle object for some years, has already supplied much useful information. The ultimate object is a continuing comparison of numbers, past and present, together with a forecast for the future. Such a requirement cannot be fulfilled until there are a known series of "past" figures with which to compare "present" figures. The reports which are coming in now will be the "past" figures for the future; only in very few instances are there older figures for comparison. The information which is immediately useful is of a very varied nature and deals with such matters as pollution, drainage, flooding, migration times and routes, causes of mortality, proportion of young, etc.

The winter of 1947/48 was an exceptionally mild one. Even so the number of "Nil returns" from the south west of England were most surprising. From them, and others, it is apparent that most of the ducks never reached the S.W. and that those which did so returned northwards abnormally early. Even in the eastern counties birds returned northwards months earlier than they normally do, while many never left the continent of Europe.

There were interesting reports regarding proportion of young, the extremes being in the case of Pintail and Brent Geese. Though it was a year in which Pintail were plentiful, young birds were very few. One very reliable observer reports that 350 pairs of Pintails spent the greater part of the winter under his close observation; they arrived in pairs and left in pairs and had less than 2 per cent young. This absence of young Pintails was noted in other places. Whitefronted Geese had 26 per cent young with an average family size of between 3 and 4, while 58 per cent were adults without young and only 16 per cent were parents. Brent Geese had 28 per cent young while a large proportion of their families numbered 5 and it is considered that 4 was the average family size, which leads to almost similar figures of 28 per cent young, 14 per cent parents, 58 per cent adults without young. These figures were taken from large flocks, the proportion of young being higher in small flocks of Brent which tend to be composed more of family parties.

Some of the reports of direction of flight of migrating geese have linked up and shown movements which hitherto have been barely suspected. (The linking up of these migration lines is of importance in showing the interdependence of different districts and countries. The importance of co-operation in wildfowl preservation between the countries becomes more apparent).

There is a mistaken idea that the immediate object of the count was to produce a census of the numbers of wildfowl in Great Britain. This has never been the object, though the count will go a long way towards such a census. The original idea was to get a series of counts made at intervals over a long period of time, and each covering a sample area. It is not possible to cover the whole of any district, but it is possible to cover certain sample areas within that district. It may be argued that by counting on such

smaller areas a false impression will be formed owing to fowl on one occasion being in a nearby area not covered by the count and on another occasion concentrated within the area covered by the count. But, with a large number of sample areas and a long run of counts these false figures will average out; the unduly high numbers cancelling the unduly low ones. The same counterbalancing occurs between overestimates and underestimates throughout a large number of observers. Some people have been afraid of sending an overestimate and have deliberately reduced their estimates. High estimates are no more inaccurate than low estimates. Individual observers do tend either to over- or under-estimate, but this does not matter so long as they continue to form their estimates in the same way. For example, an accurate 2,000 one year compared with 1,500 another year gives exactly the same result as a pair of underestimates of 1,600 and 1,200 or overestimates of 2,400 and 1,800, in each case a change of 4 to 3.

Many counters have had difficulty in estimating numbers. The best way is to count individual birds up to a certain number, say 25, then assume that a portion of the flock is four times that bulk and is therefore 100 and if the whole flock is more than 5 times the 100 and less than 6 times, it will number about 550. Having made such an estimate which, with practice, is surprisingly accurate and occupies only a few seconds, try to check it with a more accurate count. But make the quick estimate first, before some unforeseen occurrence scares the birds. Practice makes perfect, and before long one can estimate, without counting, to a remarkable degree of accuracy; just as a practiced shepherd will see at a glance if some of his sheep are missing or some of his neighbours sheep are amongst his own.

Some people have not sent in Nil Returns or records of very low numbers. In fact these records are of as much importance as the records of high numbers; without them a true estimate or a true basis for future comparison is impossible.

Many counters have given helpful advice regarding the conduct of the count, and such advice will always be welcome. Last winter was the first trial and many unforeseen circumstances have intruded themselves on the count. The first essential is the choice of dates. Most people prefer the week end in spite of the fact that week end shooting causes more movement. The same period of the moon must be chosen in order to get the same conditions of tide. New Moon is the obvious time because then the nights are dark no matter what the weather. Thus the week end nearest to the time of New Moon is a choice imposed upon the count. The ideal would be to have a count each month from August to April - 9 counts. But in these days when all the population is busy filling in forms of one sort or another, it was thought inadvisable to ask for so much; however a count each month would be of the greatest value, if observers can manage so many. For those who can only manage a few, dates of special importance have been chosen. It is realised that such dates are not the most suitable for all parts of Britain; October may be too early in the south where November is too late in the North. It is in some ways unfortunate that in 1948 the New Moon is so early in each month. Lunar dates are bound occasionally to clash with calendar dates. In 1948 the 7th February was one date chosen. This was an unfortunate one because almost everywhere there had been a last shoot only a week before at the finish of the shooting season. Also, due to the finish of the game shooting season, pigeon and rabbit shoots caused excessive disturbance, and many waters were opened to pike fishers. The August date was at Bank Holiday time and the December date will be at Christmas time. So that 1948 is an unfortunate year for clashes.

Also the 7th February count missed the bulk of the birds in 1948 because they had already migrated northwards.

Many critics found fault with the date chosen for a start. Nearly all such critics had failed to understand that the count was to continue for many years, and that it was realised that whenever it started it would take many months to get going. Last season's counts are valuable, but they are not nearly so valuable as next season's will be, with a greater number of observers.

In spite of the petrol restrictions and other shortages, there has been a great response to the call for help, both from individuals and societies, from sportsmen and ornithologists. Each helper has enrolled other helpers and it is now necessary to decentralise the collection of information. In some districts this has already been done and Provincial Natural History Societies are running the counts in their own provinces. It is understandable that some wildfowlers and others do not wish to advertise their own areas of free shooting in their own locality, thereby running the risk, no matter how remote, of their being overshot. Therefore there will be many people who prefer to send their individual reports direct to the Committee.

Old records of numbers of fowl, game books and wildfowlers diaries are still wanted; they are the only means of arriving at figures of the past.

The hope for our future wildfowl lies in co-operation between neighbours, whether individuals or nations. Co-operation first in gaining knowledge, then in applying it. First find whether there are increases or decreases, then find the causes. After that it is possible to remedy or augment.

The old idea of "it does not nest here so there is no object in giving it a close season" is now almost universally realised to be wrong. Migrant wildfowl must be conserved just as game is conserved. But close seasons and shooting restrictions are a very small part of the necessary conservation or preservation. The most important of all is the conservation of the land itself whether it be breeding ground, feeding ground or resting place. Each species of wildfowl require several different habitats for its different activities: it may nest on the Arctic tundra or in the sub-Arctic forest, derive its autumn food from the cultivated land of the temperate zone and its winter food from Mediterranean grassland or marsh. Interference with any of these habitats may affect their numbers. It is senseless to attempt to remedy a decrease due to a change in land utilisation by excessively curtailing a shooting season. Such curtailment may be necessary as a temporary alleviation but it cannot remedy such a trouble. For this reason we must have a greater knowledge of our wildfowl; such knowledge being gleaned from all countries at all times of year and kept continually under review. The wildfowl count is one the many world wide activities directed to this end.

DATES FOR COUNTS IN 1948/49 SEASON.

The dates of special importance for counts in 1948/49 winter season are:- October 2nd, October 30th, November 27th, January 1st. It is hoped that all who can do so will take part in the counts on these dates. The dates of secondary importance, when counts will also be made are:- January 29th, March 5th, March 26th, April 25th.

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