

GOOSE-NETTING IN THE NETHERLANDS

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WHEN the need was felt of ringing geese for scientific game research it was obvious that the best way would be to co-operate with professional goose-netters. They have the equipment, decoy-geese, ability and time. The number of these men is not great: twenty-seven in all. Some of them work alone, others two to four together, so that the number of nets now in use is only seventeen. The intention of the government is to end goose-netting in conformity with the Paris Convention, because it is considered to be a form of mass-catching. Therefore licences are only given to persons who netted geese in some year between 1946 and 1951. So rejuvenation of the group is not possible and after one generation the race of goose-netters will be exterminated. Just in time we made contact with these hardened fellows who like goose-netting more than anything else.

The aim of catching and ringing geese for scientific purposes is to trace the flyways, the breeding- and wintering-areas, to study the composition of the population,—sex and age-ratios—mortality-rates, etc.

A beginning was made in February, 1954. A goose-netter was willing to yield the geese he captured for a premium about equal to the price the poulterer paid. This system proved to be satisfying for him as well as for us. So in the following years the number of netters working for our Institute was increased to six in the 1958-59 season. Nowadays sixteen nets, worked by twenty-six netters, are partly at our disposal. Five of the nets are in the province of Friesland (in the north of the country), six to the south of the IJsselmeer (in the middle of the country) and five to the south of the large rivers (in the south of the country). Up to 31st March, 1959, nearly 1500 geese of four species had been ringed (Table I).

Among the species ringed the White-fronted Goose takes the first place with 63% of the total; the Bean Goose follows with nearly 29%. Those two species are captured all over the country. Barnacle Goose and Pink-footed Goose make up over 7% and less than 1% respectively. They are caught only in the North and the middle of the country. The netters down in the South do not even know these species. It is evident that they have not occurred there in living memory. Pinkfeet pass through and winter in the Netherlands in greater numbers than the small quantities of ringed individuals would suggest. During the last three years a total of 154 Pinkfeet were captured by all the netters together. The Barnacle Goose is protected in our country and may only be caught for ringing.

Though the Whitefront is captured throughout the country, from the figures it is obvious that they pass over the southern part of the country in smaller numbers than over the northern and central provinces. On the other hand the Bean Goose is captured mainly in the South (Table 2).

These differences cannot be explained by the distribution of the netters nor by a different method of netting, for in the past years we had two netters in the North, one in the middle and three in the South. They use the

same kind of nets, and all of them have Bean Geese as well as Whitefronts as decoy-birds. In the present state of our knowledge we can only suppose that the two species have different flyways.

Perhaps it is useful to say something here on the method of the Dutch goose-netters. In November they occupy their netting-territory—the same one as last year and often even the same as their father used—in a wet grassland. It takes a whole day before they have established themselves, laying out the two nets, one opposite the other on either side of a ditch. The nets are hidden in a slit in the ground and covered with grass so that the geese cannot see them. The nets are stretched by means of cords and steel springs and can be fetched over by pulling a cord. Which net will be used, the right one or the left, depends on the direction of the wind: the net is always pulled *with* the wind. Near the net a tame goose is tethered (the “stander”): and food is scattered. In the hide in which the netter is watching at a distance of 200-400 metres other tame geese are kept in cages (the “flyers”). As soon as wild geese are sighted the flyers are thrown into the air one by one. They fly, calling, to the stander and to the food. This induces the wild geese to come down and to walk to the net. The only difference between the catchers in Friesland and in the other provinces is that the Frisians tether more than one goose near the net, sometimes as many as seven Whitefronts and Bean Geese, whereas in the other provinces only one “stander” is used. Both groups are convinced of the rightness of their own method.

Except in the North the netted geese are ringed by our own personnel. Sex and age are determined and other particulars are noted before the geese are released.

In the 1958-59 season the age ratio of Whitefronted Geese differed very much from that in two preceding years. In 1955-56 137 birds were ringed, 69 of which were adult and 68 young—ratio 1:1.00. The 1956-57 catch was too small to provide an age-ratio. In 1957-58 in 295 specimens the age ratio was 1 ad.:1.16 young; but in 1958-59 for every eight adult Whitefronts only one “chicken” was captured—ratio 1:0.12. So there is strong evidence that 1958 was a poor breeding-season for Whitefronts. For Bean Geese the following figures were noted: 1955-56 1 ad.:0.64 young; 1957-58 1:1.12; 1958-59 1:0.42. They show similar variations to the Whitefronts.

Up to 31st October, 1959, 114 recoveries have been received, 80 Whitefronts, 29 Beans and 5 Barnacles. At the end of the present season the data will be worked out for a preliminary report.

In an account of goose-netting in the Netherlands the total numbers of netted geese cannot be omitted. It must be stated that there are only few data at our disposal, because figures are only known for the last three years.

In 1956-57 831 geese were captured in all, 41 of which were ringed; in 1957-58 1,282 were captured, 535 of which were ringed; in 1958-59 1,047 were captured, 550 of which were ringed. The present season 1959-60 seems to be a good season and it is expected that again over 50% of the total catch—maybe even 1000 geese—will be ringed and released.

More and more the goose-netters like ringing geese rather than selling them to the poulterer or to some private collector, who keeps a couple in captivity.

TABLE 1. Numbers of geese ringed in the Netherlands

Season	Anser a. albifrons	Anser f. fabalis	Anser brachy- rhynchus	Branta leucopsis	Total	Number of nets
1953-54 ..	16	—	—	—	16	1
1954-55 ..	112	12	—	—	124	2
1955-56 ..	137	93	2	—	232	2
1956-57 ..	15	16	—	10	41	2
1957-58 ..	295	153	2	85	535	4
1958-59 ..	369	155	7	19	550	6
Total ..	944	429	11	114	1498	—
Percentages ..	63.0	28.7	0.7	7.6	100	—

TABLE 2. Regional distribution of geese caught for ringing: in percentages

Region	Anser a. albifrons %	Anser f. fabalis %	Anser brachy- rhynchus %	Branta leucopsis %	Total	Actual number caught
North ..	85.5	7.0	2.5	5.0	100	365
Centre ..	82.0	11.0	—	17.0	100	570
South ..	39.0	61.0	—	—	100	563
Total ..						1498

