



WILD DUCKS

THE DECOY

The Lead

THE 'lead' in the duck decoy this season was considerably better than last. During September there were at times as many as 400 wild ducks on the pool, which, it will be remembered, is no more than three-quarters of an acre in extent and less than 100 yards from the Headquarters buildings. During the evening of 25th September there were 72 Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) on the pool and on the following morning (when there was a big tide), in addition to a large number of Mallards (*Anas p. platyrhynchos*), there were over 100 Teal (*Anas c. crecca*), 32 Pintails (*Anas a. acuta*) and 11 Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*).

Later in the season however the 'lead' was not well maintained. Disturbance from farming activities and from the Trust's many visitors who, in the Big Pen, are less than 50 yards from the pond, caused a sharp decline in the numbers of ducks regularly using the pool. Nevertheless about 25 Teal were present for most of the winter and during the end of November and beginning of December a number of Shovelers came in regularly, the peak being on 4th December when 53 were present. A number of Pintails were present throughout the winter (up to 40 on 5th February) but these spent more time in the Rushy Pen than in the decoy. The comparatively small numbers of Wigeon during the later part of the season were a great disappointment especially after the good flocks of September.

Other species recorded were Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), Gadwall (*Anas s. strepera*), Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) and Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*).

The Catch

In spite of the failure of the 'lead' in the latter half of the season, the total catch of 609 ducks was a very considerable improvement on last season. Of these, 524 were ringed, the remainder being birds already ringed which were recaptured. The details are shown in Table V.

The best individual catch was on 13th September when 55 birds (49 Mallards, 6 Teal) were taken at one run in the North Pipe. On 24th September the journal reads as follows: 'A red-letter day in the Decoy, and a Saturday to boot, with a fairly large attendance in the pens. In the morning we took 24 birds, including 2 Shovelers and 2 Wigeon which were banked in the North Pipe, and then worked the dog in the House Pipe and caught 31 more—55 for the morning.

In the afternoon we tried a new technique. The wind having changed after a shower, we took a spare tunnel net to the West Pipe and caught the birds banked in it (20), then, without ringing the first lot, we quickly put on the second net and dogged, getting a further 15. Next we went round to the South Pipe and dogged again, getting 13. This brought the days total to 103, of which 10 were recaptures, one in the afternoon a recapture from the morning'.

Apart from ducks, 6 Herons (*Ardea cinerea*), 1 Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*), 2 Water-rails (*Rallus aquaticus*) and a number of Moorhens (*Gallinula chloropus*) and Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) were captured and ringed.

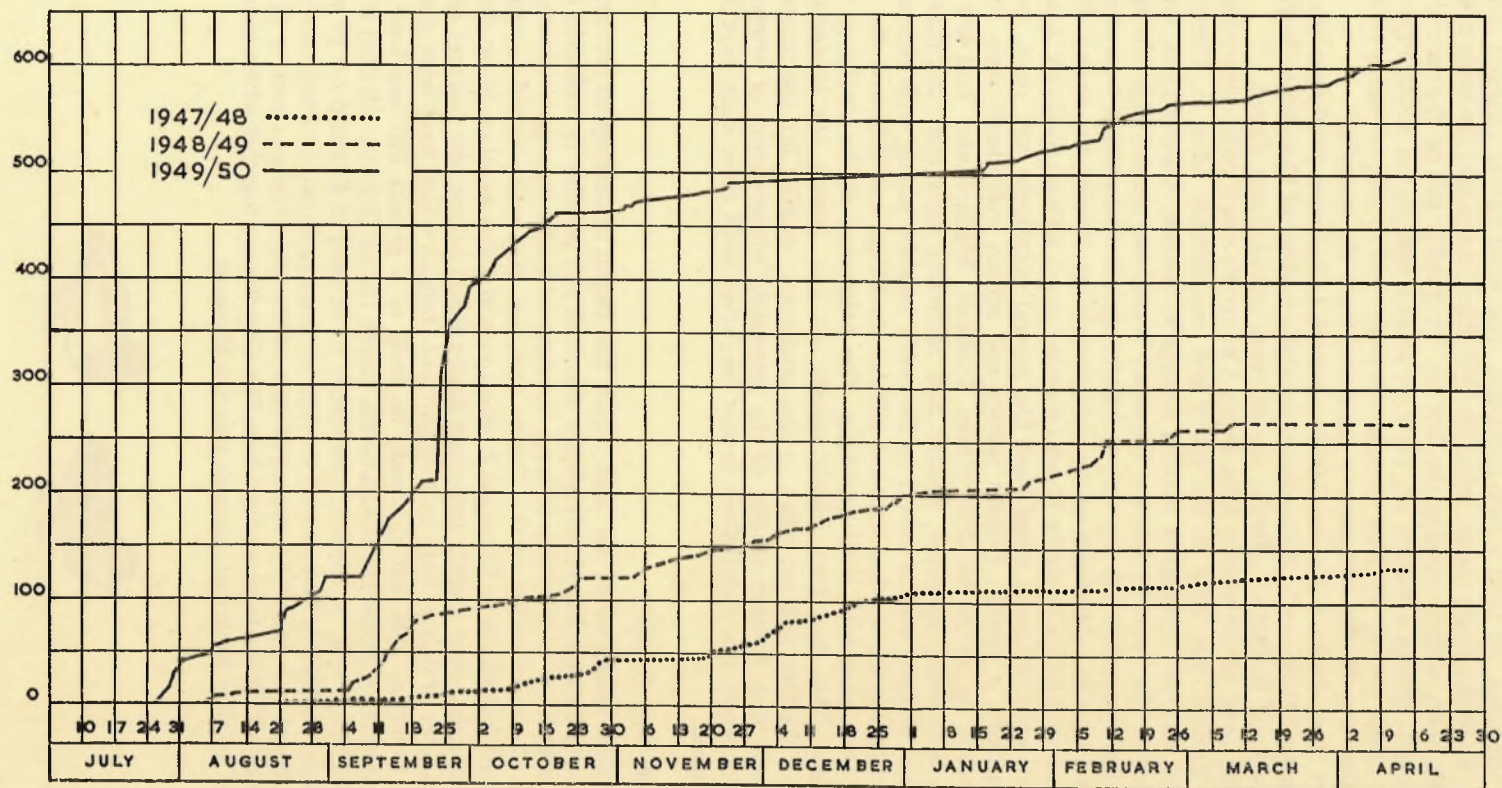
During most of the season Miss Peggy Cameron's small collie-type mongrel puppy 'Laddie' was used in the decoy and occasionally Miss E. Overend's 'Blondel' was instrumental in making successful catches. A stuffed fox, kindly presented to the Trust by Messrs. Rowland Ward, was employed in the latter part of the season but was not very successful against ducks which were already familiar with the subterfuges of the decoyman's art. During the season ducks were seen to follow a Sparrow Hawk (*Accipiter nisus*), a Grass Snake (*N. natrix*), a Water Vole (*Microtus amphibius*) (on several occasions) and once, rather half-heartedly, a Heron. Certain species and certain individuals seem to be more prone to attraction than others. Gadwall, Mallard and Teal are the species most easily attracted. Pintails and Shovelers show some indifference. A female Mallard with a brood of 24 newly hatched young ones (some no doubt collected from other females) left her ducklings and followed the dog far into the pipe with loud quacking. The behaviour of the ducklings was interesting. They had been widely spread out and feeding but immediately clustered together and sat more or less stationary, waiting for the return of the parent bird. Further studies of the interesting phenomenon of attraction are being made, but conclusions cannot be drawn until more data have been accumulated.

Proposed New Decoy

The rapid falling off of the 'lead' which had begun to develop so favourably in the early autumn has clearly shown that it is not possible to maintain conditions which are satisfactory to large numbers of ducks on a pool situated so close to the main centre of the Trust's activities. If a really useful sample of the estuary's ducks is to be ringed it seems essential that another decoy should be constructed, on a slightly improved design based on the best features of the large number of decoys both in England and Holland which have been studied by the Director, and that it should be built at a greater distance from the Headquarters. An ideal site would be the Goose House Ground, adjacent to the sea wall. This would be the first new decoy to be built in England for 80 years and might reasonably be expected to yield an average of two to three thousand ducks ringed per year. The estimated cost of the construction work is £1,500 and already £500 has been received from Mr. Guy Benson together with a number of other smaller donations towards this development.



PROGRESS OF TOTAL CATCH IN DECOY 1947-50



GRAPH II



TABLE V
CATCH AND RINGING FIGURES

Seasons	1946-7	1947-8	1948-9	1949-50	Total
Mallard	{	Ringed	..	3	64	102	410	579
		Recaptures	..	—	6	19	71	96
		Total Catch	..	3	70	121	481	675
		Recoveries	..	1	8	11	20	40
Teal	{	Ringed	..	2	24	24	56	106
		Recaptures	..	—	—	7	2	9
		Total Catch	..	2	25	31	58	116
		Recoveries	..	—	5	1	4	10
Wigeon	{	Ringed	..	—	19	52	19	90
		Recaptures	..	—	—	20	2	22
		Total Catch	..	—	21	72	21	114
		Recoveries	..	—	4	7	3	14
Pintail	{	Ringed	..	—	2	13	17	32
		Recaptures	..	—	1	4	5	10
		Total Catch	..	—	3	17	22	42
		Recoveries	..	—	—	1	—	1
Shoveler	{	Ringed	..	—	9	26	23	58
		Recaptures	..	—	—	—	3	3
		Total Catch	..	—	9	26	26	61
		Recoveries	..	—	5	5	2	12
Garganey	{	Ringed	..	1	2	1	1	5
		Recaptures	..	—	—	—	—	—
		Total Catch	..	1	5	2	1	9
		Recoveries	..	—	—	—	—	—
Total	{	Ringed	..	6	120	218	526	870
		Recaptures	..	—	7	50	83	140
		Total Catch	..	6	133	269	609	1017
		Recoveries	..	1	22	25	29	77

TABLE VI
METHODS OF CAPTURE IN DECOY

Season	Without Dog				With Dog				Total		
	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	Per cent. of Total Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	Per cent. of Total Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch
1946-47 ..	6	3	2.00	100	—	—	—	—	6	3	2.00
1947-48 ..	84	47	1.79	63.2	49	14	3.50	36.8	133	61	2.18
1948-49 ..	190	98	1.94	70.6	79	19	4.37	29.4	269	117	2.29
1949-50 ..	432	101	4.27	70.8	177	30	5.90	29.2	609	131	4.66
Grand Total	712	249	2.86	69.9	305	63	4.84	30.1	1017	312	3.26

STATUS OF DUCKS

No very great quantities of ducks have been present at any time during the winter in the neighbourhood of the New Grounds. The largest counts of Mallards were between 1,300 and 1,400, and up to about 2,000 Wigeon were estimated. Accurate counting of ducks is very difficult, since a good view of the roosting grounds by the river channel cannot be obtained without disturbing the wild geese. It is intended to construct a special hut at the end of Middle-point Breakwater, with covered access, in order to command a view of the channels and sandbanks, but the Trust's resources may not permit this development in the immediate future.

Counts were made as frequently as possible and in particular on the dates called for by the Wildfowl Count Group of the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee.

The numbers of Shelducks increased as usual during February, the highest count being 184. Special observations will be made during July following the recent discoveries made by R. A. H. Coombes,¹ J. Hoogerheide and W. K. Kraak² which indicate that Shelducks from this country migrate eastwards in late summer apparently in order to moult in the Heligoland Bight, returning by easy stages during the following winter.

SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

Only small numbers bred on the estuary. Numbers remained low until late January. Thereafter birds increased; 68 on 5th February; 184 on 20th February.

PINTAIL (*Anas a. acuta*)

Numbers seen on the estuary varied widely, with a maximum of 150 or more

¹ Ibis 92 (3): 405-418, 1950.

² Ardea 31: 1-19, 1942.

on 12th March. More than 200 were reported in the flooded Tack Piece on 12th February (K. Shackleton). Up to 25 frequented the Rushy Pen from end of December till end of February. Over 40 on 5th February.

TEAL (*Anas c. crecca*)

Numerous on the estuary from September to March. No good counts were made in the early part of the winter, but c. 600 on 25th September; in February (410 on 20th) it was the most abundant species of duck on the river. The maximum number seen in the decoy was over 100 on 26th September. There was some indication of small numbers of fresh birds passing through at the end of March and beginning of April.

MALLARD (*Anas p. platyrhynchos*)

The population around Headquarters comprises a mixture of hand-reared and wild birds defying adequate analysis. The largest number seen on the estuary was c. 1,300 on 25th September, and counts fluctuated subsequently between 700 and 1,300 until early February. In mid-February the population declined sharply, so that by early March only about 50 were present.

GADWALL (*Anas s. strepera*)

A pair of wild birds appeared on the decoy on 31st October. The female indicated by her behaviour when the pair flew in to the Big Pen at feeding time that she was the unringed bird of the two females which arrived on 27th October, 1948, and left on 15th April, 1949. The pair had gone on the following day but returned on 18th November, and thereafter remained throughout the winter. As before, the female, although frequently feeding at one's feet defied capture, and the male who soon became as tame as his mate, could not be caught either.

A further female appeared for one day on the decoy on 11th December.

WIGEON (*Anas penelope*)

Large numbers on the estuary from November to early February (well over 1,000 on several occasions and up to 2,000 in mid-November). Very few seen after middle of February. Largest number in decoy 72 on 25th September. Thereafter disappointingly few. A few reappeared in decoy in April. Up to 15 regularly in Rushy Pen from November until early February. At least two males have become exceptionally tame and one appears to have been continuously present for 18 months.

GARGANEY (*Anas querquedula*)

Nine during year: one caught in decoy 16th April, 1949. One female in Rushy Pen from 28th May-7th June. One male in eclipse plumage from 10th June-c. 15th June. One female caught in decoy 21st August. One male seen in decoy 4th September and two 25th September. A pair in Rushy Pen on 7th April, 1950.

SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

Present in small numbers on estuary from August till April. Some numbers on decoy till end December: 6 on 28th July, up to 14 during August, 32 on 22nd November, 53 on 4th December, 22 on 4th January; few thereafter, but 5 in April. One male frequently in second decoyside pen with pinioned females,

during April and comparatively tame. Second male with damaged quill feathers usually on decoy or in Rushy Pen.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*)

Single males in the decoy 3rd and 31st December and 15th January (possibly the same birds). During the previous winter up to 9 Pochards had frequented the decoy regularly. It was disappointing that these did not reappear during the present season.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*)

The female which spent the winter of 1948-49 in the Rushy Pen left on 15th April, 1949. Three males appeared for one day on the decoy on 4th July. One female also for one day on the decoy on 1st November.

RINGING AND RECOVERIES

(Anatidæ)



THE ringing of geese and ducks was undertaken as usual for the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee and the birds were made available for the Committee's Duck Adoption Scheme (by which for the sum of 5s. a duck which has been ringed may be adopted and any future information of recovery is communicated to the adopter. The resulting funds are devoted to the development of the Committee's ringing effort).

The rings used are, of course, those of the British Trust for Ornithology and carry the address of the British Museum of Natural History, London.

The following geese and ducks were ringed and released at the New Grounds during the year:

TABLE VII
BIRDS RINGED

Rocket-nets	Duck Decoy	Traps or other Methods of Capture
69 White-fronted Geese	410 Mallard 56 Teal 19 Wigeon 17 Pintail 23 Shoveler 1 Garganey	1 Mallard 6 Pintail 1 Teal

The following birds were ringed under the auspices of the Trust in Scotland—
Rocket-nets: 29 Greylag Geese; 7 Pink-footed Geese.