



REPORT

At the Second Annual General Meeting of the Severn Wildfowl Trust on 28th February, 1949, the Minutes of which, together with the Balance Sheet and Accounts will be found on pages 48 to 51, the Council presented to the Members a Report of the past year's work at the New Grounds. Owing to the limited time available at the Meeting, this could only give an outline of what has been done. The Report which follows is therefore a more comprehensive and complete one, and includes occurrences between 28th February and 30th April when the present Report was placed in the printer's hands.

The activities of the Severn Wildfowl Trust fall sharply into two seasons : the winter, in which the wild geese visit the estuary and the ducks are caught in the duck decoy ; and the summer, in which the tame birds in the waterfowl collection are breeding and the young are being reared. For this reason the most suitable end to the Trust's year is at the end of the winter season when the geese have left the Dumbles and the ducks have left the decoy pool. The last ducks do not usually leave until April, and so it is appropriate that this report should cover not only 1948 but the first three months of 1949 ; the Trust's ornithological year will, therefore, coincide approximately with the fiscal year.

THE WILD GEESE

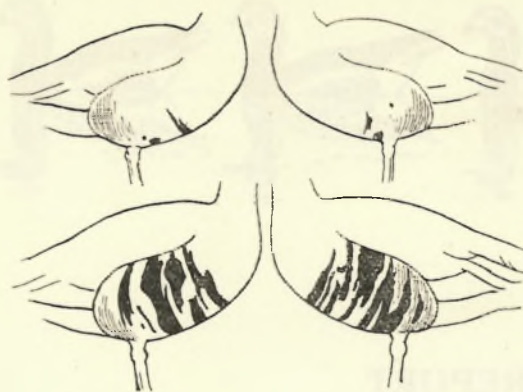
Although the Trust is mainly concerned with wildfowl, a complete list of the birds seen during the year on the New Grounds will be found on pages 19 to 24.

Slightly more geese were present on the estuary at the peak periods this winter than were counted there last season, and the first of them arrived on precisely the same day. Eight Pink-footed Geese (*Anser arvensis brachyrhynchus*) were seen on 21st September. The first White-fronted Geese (*Anser a. albifrons*) appeared on 15th October. By the end of the month there were 58 Pink-feet and 38 White-fronts. As usual the Pink-feet began to leave by mid-November at which time there were just over 200 White-fronts on the marsh. The main influx of geese was in the second half of December, and the peak was reached by 15th January when 3,800 were present.

Lesser White-fronted, Greylag and Bean Geese

Meanwhile on 20th December an adult gander Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*) appeared in the flock. This was an exceptionally large bird for a Lesser White-front, which gave rise to the suspicion that it might be a hybrid between a Lesser and a Common White-front. This theory,

however, was abandoned after very detailed examination of the bird at close range. In all other respects but size it was a typical Lesser White-front. The bird was a gander and was well paired with a female Common White-front.



Male Lesser White-front

*Female Common White-front
paired to Lesser White-front*

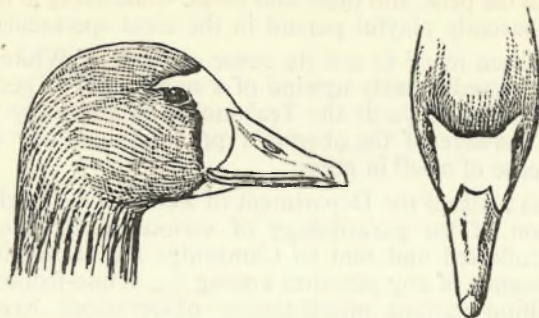
It was seen on 25 days (December 20th, 21st, 24th, 26th, 30th ; January 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 16th, 18th, 21st, 23rd, 24th, 27th, 30th ; February 4th, 6th, 8th, 9th, 12th, 13th). This was the eighth Lesser White-front recorded in Britain. The ninth was shot near Great Yarmouth on 24th January, 1949. From the markings on its belly it does not seem to have been one of the three recorded at the New Grounds in the winter of 1946-47. It is of interest to record that whereas most records of unusual geese are of immature specimens which have strayed to some flock of a different kind, all nine of the Lesser White-fronts except the first, shot in 1882 in Northumberland, have been adults, mostly ganders and often paired to Common White-front females.

This season's Lesser White-front (still as rare a bird as most people are ever likely to see) was watched by about 500 ornithologists, many of whom had come especially for the purpose. On 23rd January the bird was shown to 120 visitors. Apart from this bird there was a disappointing number of unusual geese among the White-front flock. A few Pink-feet appeared as stragglers from time to time after the main party of their species had left. These were mainly single immatures, but on two occasions adult pairs remained for a few days. An immature Greylag (*Anser a. anser*) was recorded on 15th, 16th and 23rd January, and it is possible that two Greylags were present on the last date although this could not be confirmed. On 13th February an immature Bean Goose (*Anser a. arvensis*) appeared on the Dumbles remaining for one day only.

Two Unusual White-fronted Geese

Among the White-fronted Geese two notable birds were observed. The first was a gander with a curiously shaped white blaze which extends symmetrically in a peak over each eye. This bird, known as "White-eyebrows," was first seen on 3rd December, 1947, and remained for a considerable part of last season. This season it did not reappear until 18th January but remained until 12th March. Careful note was taken of the breast markings of its mate. The second unusual bird was an immature seen on 5th January with the front half of the face white. This extended as far back as the eyes and, unlike the white blaze of the adult, was irregularly edged with dotted white feathers. The whole head gave something of the impression of an immature Blue Snow. There was also slight white peppering on the neck. The bird was one of a family of two adults and two young. The old birds and the other young one were perfectly normal. Three or four other immature White-fronts

were seen which showed white peppering, mostly on the neck or sides of the breast. It seems that this albinistic tendency is not uncommon.



'White-eyebrows,' an unusually marked White-fronted Goose

Recoveries

For various reasons it has not been possible to net any geese for ringing on the New Grounds this season, but two of the 16 caught and ringed last year have been reported. One was seen on the Dumbles on 3rd January, 1949, so close to one of the observation huts that the numbers on the ring could be read. This showed that it was one of the series ringed on 18th February, 1948, but a smudge of mud obscured the last and most important of the six figures. The second record was of an adult male, ringed on the same date and shot on 7th January, 1949, on Zeeland in Holland. The method of netting is being improved and it is hoped that it may be possible to ring a number of geese next season.

Proportion of Immature Birds

The breeding season for the White-fronts in the Arctic seems to have been more successful than the year before. The first geese brought only 19 per cent. young birds (with an average family size of 3), but later the figures rose to 32.6 per cent. young (average family size 3.3), which compares favourably with the figures for the season 1947-48—26 per cent. young (average family size 3.6). It must be emphasised that these figures are of little significance by themselves, but when available for comparison over a period of years, should indicate the status and numerical trend of the species.

Special Studies

Detailed studies have been begun of the language and behaviour of White-fronted geese. A number of calls with particular meanings can now be distinguished and interpreted. The characteristic head flicking which nearly always precedes take-off (except in cases of extreme alarm when there is no time for it) has been studied, and it is believed to be a development of the movement which frees the bill from loose pieces of grass or earth, but which is now useful in indicating to other birds the intention to fly. (Ducks have a parallel to this in the sharp back and forth jerking of head and neck which is the first movement of taking off, but is repeated again and again beforehand, apparently in order to convey the intention to other members of the party.) Among the geese a strange half drooping of both wings has been observed but is at present without explanation. On certain days many of the flock do it, and even on days when few are doing so, it is normal to see all of one family adopting this curious carriage of the wings.

On 6th February, 1949, a very interesting nuptial pursuit flight lasting for nearly three-quarters of an hour was observed, in which three geese were following a fourth. This was exceptionally early for such behaviour and was an

unusually marked example of this kind of aerobatic flight. On that day large numbers of geese were moving from one field to another, passing frequently over the decoy and the pens, and these four birds, while flying in the main stream, continued the apparently playful pursuit in the most spectacular manner.

Studies have been made to test the sense of smell of White-fronted Geese. As two observers passed directly upwind of a small party of geese feeding with some Common Teal at 20 yards the Teal moved immediately while the geese were apparently unaware of the observers' proximity. Many other examples point to a poor sense of smell in geese.

The Trust has assisted the Department of Zoology, Cambridge University, in an investigation of the parasitology of various birds. For this purpose droppings were collected and sent to Cambridge for examination. This did not reveal the presence of any parasites among the White-fronted Geese on the estuary. In addition various miscellaneous observations have been made; for example, it has been noticed that the geese with families are always the nearest to the sea wall. This may be because the best and least grazed grass is usually near the sea wall and the parents are prepared to take a risk in order to let the young birds get the best feed.

Disturbance by Aircraft

The effect of aircraft on the geese is interesting. Light aircraft, biplanes and twin-boomed jet planes are the most disturbing. *Mosquitos* put them up more easily than *Meteors*, but this may only be because they see more of the latter. It is the sight rather than the sound which is disturbing, as *Meteors* passing overhead in low cloud or mist do not disturb the birds at all. Towards the end of the season they take less notice of aircraft than before, but any plane at less than 2,000 feet coming straight at them will always put them up. The effect of aircraft disturbance is particularly unfortunate for watching, since, if the geese have been close in to the observation huts they always settle further out after being flushed, and may take an hour or more to walk in, by which time they are likely enough to be flushed again by another aircraft. During the past winter, air activity has so greatly increased that this disturbance has been serious and has given rise to fears that the geese may seek some winter quarters further removed from an important airfield for jet fighters.

Negotiations, however, are in progress with the Ministries of Supply and Civil Aviation and the Air Ministry to make the New Grounds a Prohibited Area for flying (below 3,000 feet). A more serious problem, however, is the threat to open a bombing range covering the high sand on which the geese roost and a part of the saltmarsh on which they feed. There is no doubt at all that this would be a disaster of the first magnitude to the Trust and its aims, but it is still hoped that some other arrangements will be possible.

Watching Facilities

Facilities for watching the geese this winter have been improved by the construction of three new huts during the summer, one by Boy Scouts of the 27th Newport Troop and the others under the able hand of Mr. S. T. Johnstone, our Head Warden. There are now no gaps in the chain of observation points along the sea wall. In all, 19 huts have been built—16 of them for watching the geese. It cannot be too strongly emphasised, however, that the Trust cannot guarantee a view of the wild geese to its Members, since the principle that the geese must on no account be disturbed has been, and must continue to be, a prime consideration. Those visiting the New Grounds should read the conditions printed on page 46 so as to know the exact position and to avoid disappointment.

TOTAL NUMBER OF WILD GEESE ON THE NEW GROUNDS 1946-49

