

THE DECOY

Construction

Only two pipes were in existence when the decoy was taken over by the Trust. The South pipe was dug out and equipped for the season 1947-48, and last summer the fourth or House pipe was built by our Head Warden, Mr. S. T. Johnstone, assisted by Mr. Heinz Meineke (ex-P.O.W.), and an enthusiastic Member to whom we are greatly indebted, Mr. John Paige. It caught its first duck on 5th September, 1948. Thus the pool is now once more a working four-pipe decoy in accordance with the original design. A further improvement has been the construction of an observation hut on stilts at the edge of the decoy wood. This hut is known as the Gazebo and gives an excellent view of the pool and the mouths of the House and West pipes from treetop level.

The Lead

During the summer about 120 Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) were reared on the decoy—only about 30 of them being pinioned. Seven Wigeon drakes (*Anas penelope*) were originally pinioned and put on the pool with about 10 females which had been feather-cut during the previous season and kept in one of the pipes during the summer. Five Pintails (*Anas acuta*) were also reared with full wings. These birds were trained to sit steadily when "shown over" and at night they flew out from the pool bringing wild birds as they returned. The result was a far more satisfactory "lead" than had been seen in the previous season. The decoy was closed to visitors on 3rd August, 1948, and by 6th August there were 17 Shovelers (*Anas clypeata*) and 8 Teal (*Anas c. crecca*) on the pool. On the following day the ringing season was opened with a day's catch of 6 Shovelers, 1 Mallard and 1 Teal. One female Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) came to the pool on 22nd August, 1948; it was caught and kept for the tame collection, as one had been on 23rd August, 1947. (On spring passage the following Garganey had been seen: 26th March, 1948, a pair caught; 28th March, another pair seen; 5th April, two females caught.)

Mallard came in small numbers and were caught from time to time. The lead of Teal built up in an interesting way. There were few on the pool before 5th December, on which day there were six. By 27th December there were 11, by the 30th—21, by 1st January—41, by 4th January—53, but, after trying to catch them with the dog, there were only 15 Teal on 5th January, and that number remained more or less steady until the end of March, varying by only one or two birds either way.

A few Wigeon came to the decoy pool in December and there were 17 on 30th December. This number remained very steady all the winter. Early in February and again in mid-March the figure was over 20. Many of these birds spent some part of the day in the Big Pen. By March nearly all had been caught and ringed.

Two female Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) appeared on the pool on 27th October. They could not be caught and after a few weeks they settled down and became remarkably tame on the pond in the Big Pen, where in due course one of them

was trapped and ringed. Both have remained until the time of writing—15th April—and one (the unringed one, which, although perfectly tame, refused to enter the trap) has paired with a pinioned drake.

Diving Ducks

One of the most interesting features of the winter was the appearance of diving ducks on the decoy. The pool is no more than 18 inches deep, but on 14th December a female Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) arrived. Within a few days she had moved to the pond in the Rushy Pen where she has remained until the time of writing. On 25th January she was caught in the trap and ringed (but was nothing daunted by her experience, as she came up to feed with the other birds as usual next day).

On 18th December a female Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) appeared, and remained on the pool until on 27th December she was joined by six more (four males, two females). Up to seven were present until the end of January. On 31st January there were nine (five males, four females). These Pochards were perpetually diving and evidently went deep into the mud, as they often surfaced with the whole head completely covered in grey ooze. Before diving they almost invariably sat up and paddled—apparently to stir a patch of mud beneath them. Although they would usually follow the dog as far as the mouth of the pipe they could not be persuaded to come far enough in to be caught. On 5th March, 1948, a female Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) visited the pool, but she could not be caught either.

The Catch

The total catch has been 269 ducks, which is just over double the previous season's total. Table I shows in the four columns under each of the six species the number ringed; those already ringed which have been recaptured in the decoy (perhaps more than once); the total catch; and the number recovered. The last figure is, of course, still low for this season as not many of the ringed birds have yet been shot.

In addition to ducks the following were caught in the decoy:—2 Herons, 1 Tawny Owl, 2 Sparrow-Hawks, 2 Turtle-Doves, 1 Swift, 1 Coot, numerous Moorhens.

One of the most interesting captures was a Common Teal ringed in the decoy on 14th October, 1947, and caught again on 29th November, 1948. It has, of course, been released once more. The details of the recoveries of these and other birds ringed by the Trust are shown on page 25.

Methods

(The operating principles of a decoy are described in the First Annual Report of the Trust—page 53.)

An analysis of the catch figures shows the effect of the use of the dog on the various species (Table II) and a comparison of the success of each of the pipes, although this depends to a large extent upon the direction of the wind (Table III). In nearly all cases the Assistant Curator's large yellow dog, Blondel, was the enticing animal. On 16th September, 1948, he was instrumental in catching four Mallards by moonlight. Hitherto dogging by moonlight had not proved to be successful. A white Pekinese (Bushy) was responsible for catching one Mallard. One Teal and one Wigeon were caught at different times with a ferret on a line. Four Mallards and two Wigeon were caught after a wild stoat had been seen to run through one of the screens into the view of the ducks on the pool. A dead stoat dangled on a string from a thin stick was comparatively successful, but was only tried late in the season when most of the wild birds on the pool were too familiar with the dangers of the pipes. (It is of note that a dog and also a dead stoat attract the tame

TABLE I
SPECIES CAUGHT, RINGED AND RECOVERED

		Seasons ..	1946-47	1947-48	1948-49	Total
Mallard ..	{	Ringed	3	64	102	169
		Recaptures ..	—	6	19	25
		Total catch ..	3	70	121	194
		Recoveries ..	1	5	3	9
Teal	{	Ringed	2	24	24	50
		Recaptures ..	—	—	7	7
		Total catch ..	2	25	31	58
		Recoveries ..	—	4	—	4
Wigeon ..	{	Ringed	—	19	52	71
		Recaptures ..	—	—	20	20
		Total catch ..	—	21	72	93
		Recoveries ..	—	4	1	5
Pintail ..	{	Ringed	—	2	13	15
		Recaptures ..	—	1	4	5
		Total catch ..	—	3	17	20
		Recoveries ..	—	—	1	1
Shoveler ..	{	Ringed	—	9	26	35
		Recaptures ..	—	—	—	—
		Total catch ..	—	9	26	35
		Recoveries ..	—	5	1	6
Garganey ..	{	Ringed	1	2	1	4
		Recaptures ..	—	—	—	—
		Total catch ..	1	5	2	8
		Recoveries ..	—	—	—	—
Total	{	Ringed	6	120	218	344
		Recaptures ..	—	7	51	57
		Total catch ..	6	133	269	408
		Recoveries ..	1	18	6	25

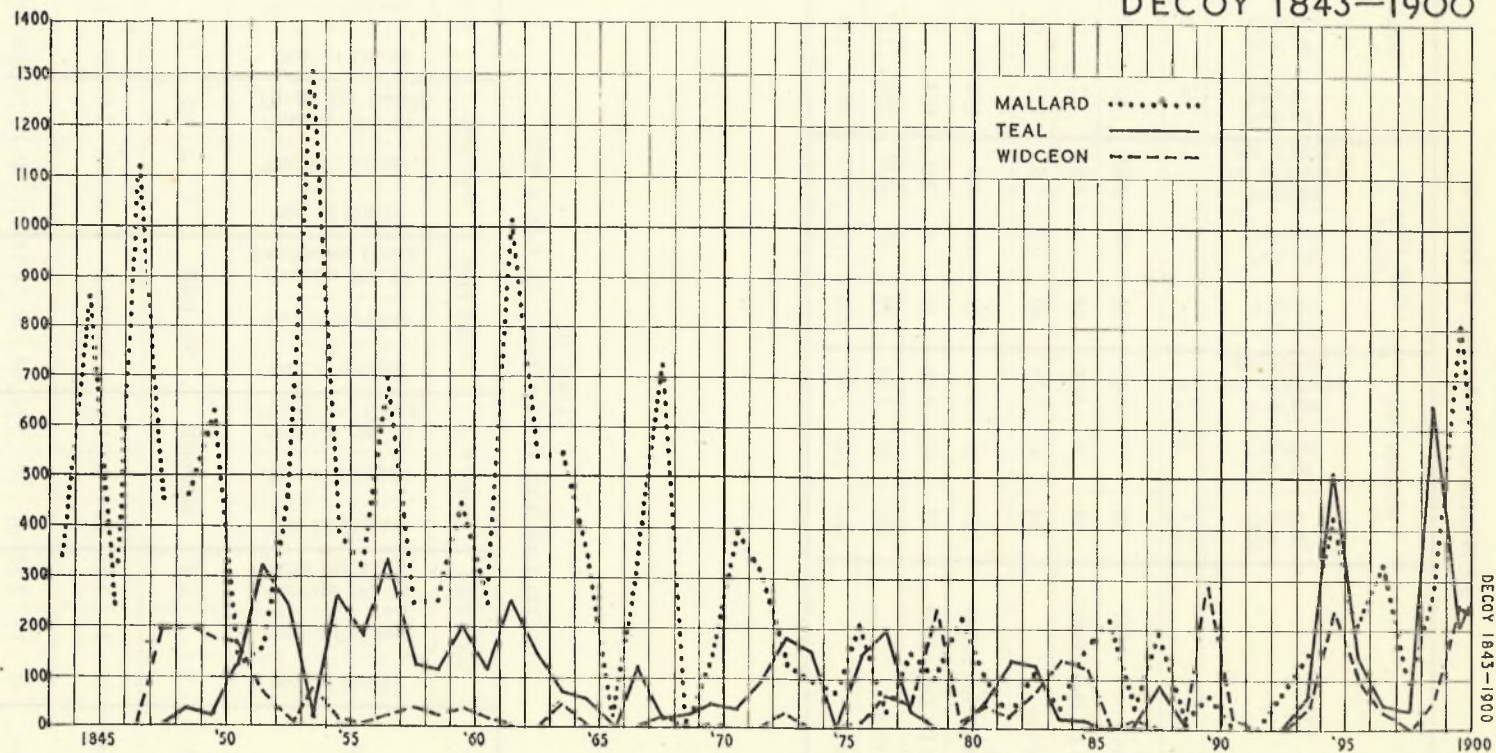
TABLE II
METHODS OF CAPTURE IN DECOY

Season	Without Dog			With Dog or Ferret			Total		
	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch
1946-47	6	3	2.0	—	—	—	6	3	2.0
1947-48 : Till 30th Nov., 1947 ..	30	21	1.43	31	9	3.44	61	30	2.03
From 1st Dec., 1947..	54	26	2.08	18	5	3.6	72	31	2.32
Season total	84	47	1.79	49	14	3.5	133	61	2.18
1948-49 : Till 30th Nov., 1948 ..	112	56	2.0	44	10	4.4	156	66	2.36
From 1st Dec., 1948 ..	78	42	1.86	35	9	5.0	113	51	2.21
Season total	190	98	1.94	79	19	4.37	269	117	2.29
Grand total	280	148	1.87	128	33	3.87	408	181	2.25

TABLE III
COMPARISON OF CATCHES IN EACH PIPE

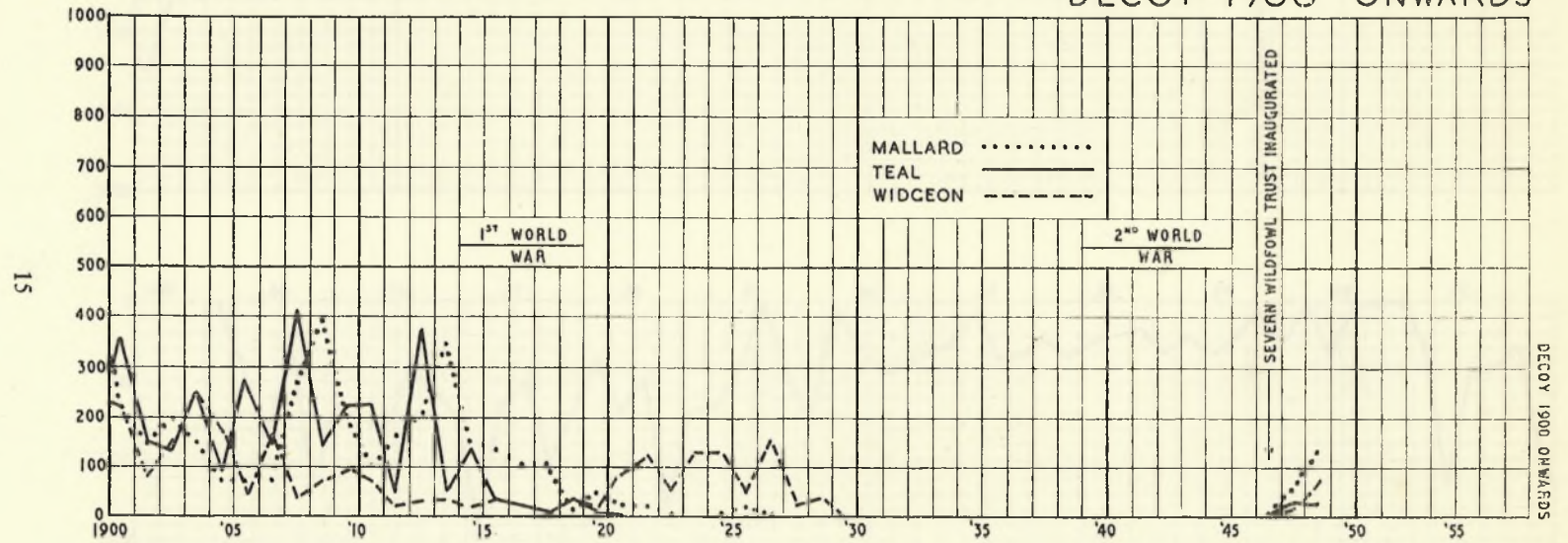
Season	North Pipe			South Pipe			House Pipe			West Pipe			Total		
	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Average No. of Ducks per Catch
1946-47..	3	1	3.0	Not built			Not built			3	2	1.5	6	3	2.0
1947-48..	77	34	2.23	10	9	1.1	Not built			46	18	2.53	133	61	2.17
1948-49..	41	16	2.56	61	27	2.26	40	26	1.54	127	48	2.64	269	117	2.29

DECOY 1843-1900

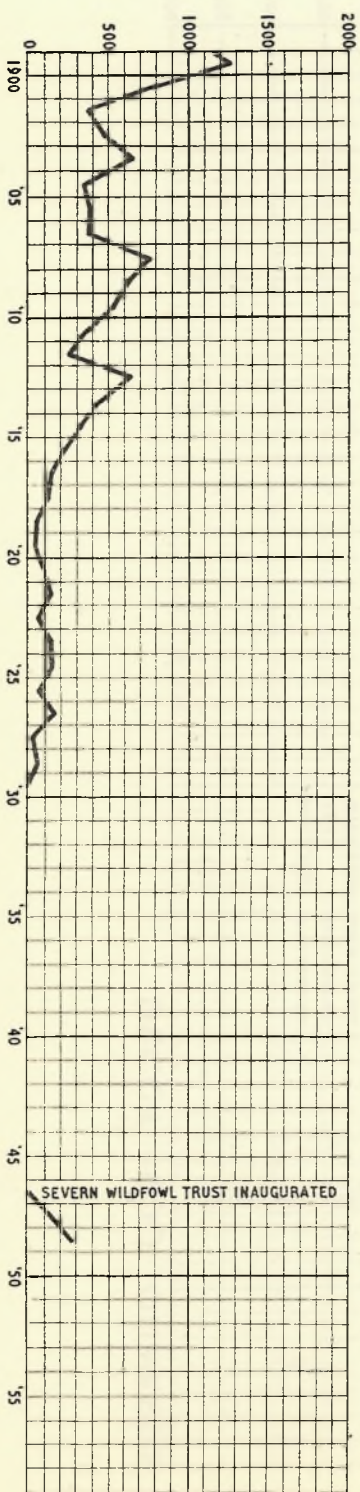
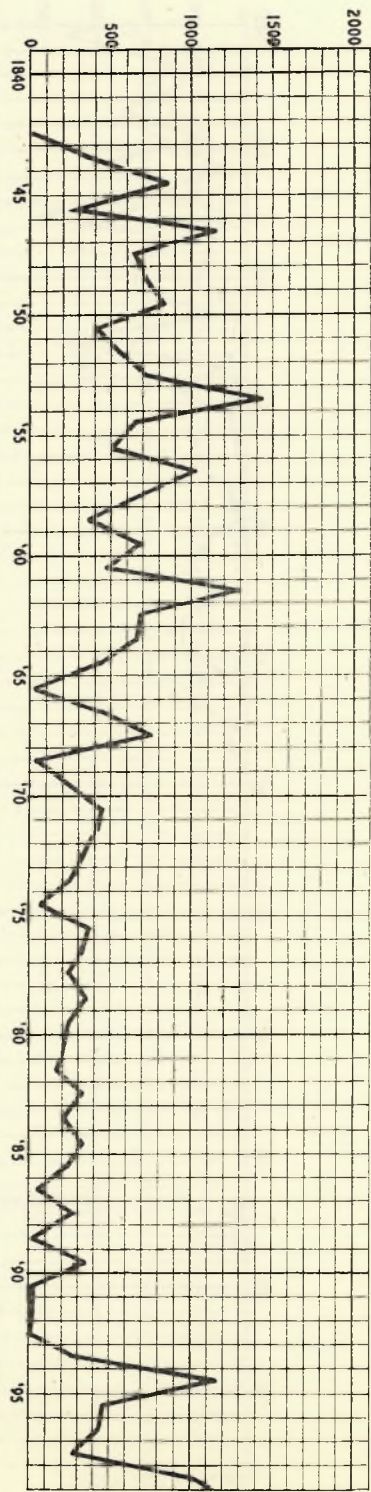


DECOY 1843-1900

DECOY 1900 ONWARDS



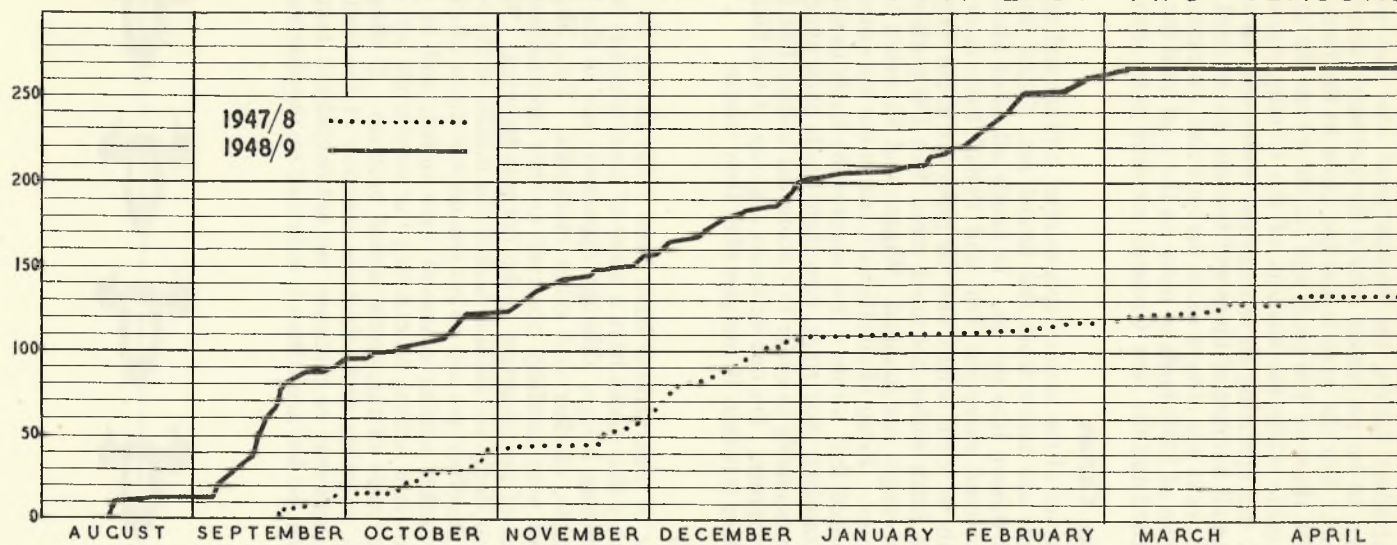
TOTAL CATCHES



TOTAL CATCHES

SEVERN WILDFOWL TRUST INAUGURATED

PROGRESS OF TOTAL CATCH IN DECOY FOR LAST TWO SEASONS



DECOY CATCH 1947-49

ducks in the collection. It is proposed to carry out some researches into this interesting and little understood instinct which appears to be stronger at certain times than at others.)

Although these catch figures do not compare very favourably with those of some well-established decoys, the improvement over last year is satisfactory and there seems to be no reason why a further improvement should not be shown next year. But the pool is just too close to the farm-yard and catches comparable with those of 100 years ago (as shown on the graph on page 14) are hardly possible while the tractors of the County Agricultural Executive Committee are still operating all through the winter and back-firing at frequent intervals. A small number of birds will become accustomed to the noise, but large flocks of ducks are always more nervous and we cannot hope to have a winter population of 1,000 birds or more on the pool until the surrounding land has been re-seeded and the New Grounds are once more mainly under grass.

Behaviour After Capture

The behaviour of the various species after capture and release is characteristic. The birds are taken from the tunnel net, ringed immediately on the spot, and then thrown into the air. In nearly all cases Mallards head for the estuary, but without exception Teal and Pintail have returned to the pool. The pool is only 60 yards square and the pipes are about 60 yards long. They must, therefore, settle within not much more than 100 yards of the place where they have been caught and handled. Wigeon and Shovelers also almost always return to the pool. From observations made in the huts overlooking the pool it has been noticed that within a few minutes the lately captured birds, having preened and examined their rings, turn their heads back under their wings and go to sleep—presumably in order to restore the energy lost in the flutter and excitement of capture. On one occasion a group of five Shovelers were all to be seen fast asleep less than 10 minutes after their release.

Sense of Smell

A number of observations have been made during the year which show quite conclusively that ducks have a sense of smell which is considerably better than that of human beings, although apparently not in the same category as that, for example, of deer and other mammals. Two Shovelers swimming across the pool were carefully observed as they approached the corner over which the scent of the observers in the hut was blowing. When they reached it they turned suddenly and flushed back to the middle of the pond. They could not have seen the observers and no movement was made which could have been heard. Many other similar examples were noted, and in some cases birds were prevented from settling by catching the scent while still in flight. Further studies will be made of this controversial problem. It should be noted that this sense may be more acute than the reaction of the birds would indicate, since a dilute scent may be perceived but not considered dangerous ; the sense cannot, however, be *less* acute than is indicated by the observed reaction.

