

WILD DUCKS

THE DECOY

The Lead

During late August and early September large flocks of Mallards fed regularly, by day as well as by night, in wheat fields to the east of the decoy, one of which had been abandoned uncut because of the wet weather. It was not uncommon to see up to 1,500 ducks milling round over these fields. It was not surprising, therefore, that many of them came to the decoy and on several mornings there were up to 400 birds on the pool, although they seldom remained for more than a few hours, no doubt because of the unavoidable noise and activity round the headquarters which are in this respect regrettably close. Owing to the rains it was possible to obtain spoiled wheat in considerable quantity and the pipes were extensively fed, with excellent results, during September. As in the previous year, however, the 'lead' fell off during October and November, and apart from a spring of 20-30 Teal which frequented the pool during January and February, the numbers of ducks were continuously disappointing after so promising a start.

The Catch

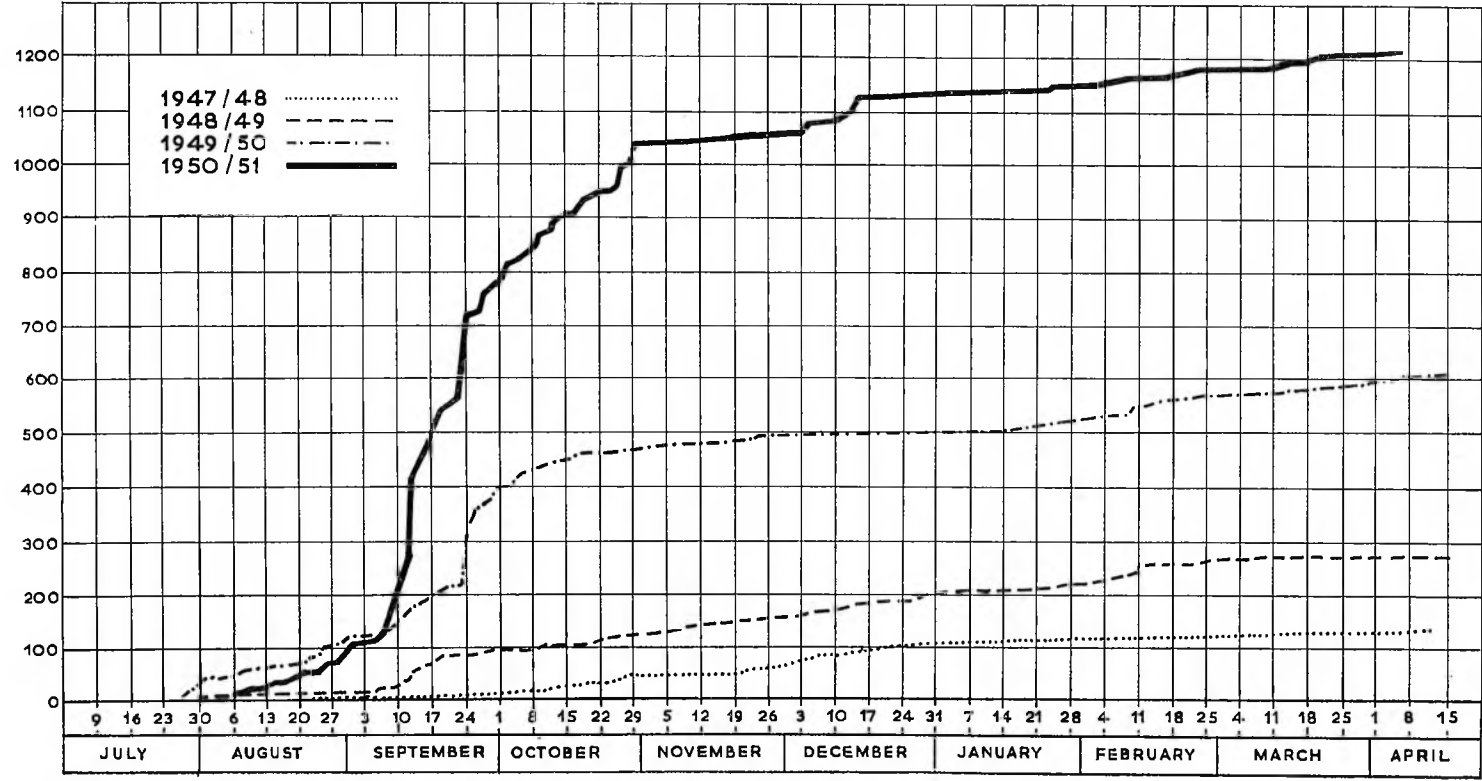
The season's total catch of 1,203 was nearly double that of the previous one (609). Since the decoy was first built in 1843 this total has only been exceeded 3 times (1853-54, 1,410 ; 1861-62, 1,295 ; 1899-1900, 1,273).

The most productive period of the season was during September, 1950 ; the Director's journal reads as follows :

'Work continued in the decoy until the end of July, and thereafter the "lead" was slow in building up. By 13th August there were about 50 birds and by 18th over 80, but this seems to have been a flash in the pan, for at the end of the month there were only 14 mallards although there were 31 teal. These fell off, too, and during the first few days of September only about 30 ducks were to be seen on the pool.

'On 4th September I began feeding the West and South pipes. (Hitherto they had been fed lightly in the mornings only.) For the first night I put one bucket on the running side of each pipe (W. and S.). The "lead" began to increase almost at once. Two days later, on 6th September, there were 73, and on 7th and 8th over 100. On the night of 9th September, C. and I put 1 cwt. of mouldy wheat in the South and West with some in the House and North pipes as well. Next morning there were 286 ducks on the pool, suggesting that perhaps they had smelled the grain—it was hot when put in. Unfortunately, there was an unexplained flush while we were in the North hut and after it only 133 ducks remained. That night another sack went in and next morning, 11th September, we caught 42 in the West and there were 240 ducks still on the pool after the catch. At about 5.30 p.m. we took 62 in the South pipe (not a single recapture) and afterwards about 80 ducks were left on the pool. Thus we had caught 104 in the day—a record. . . . That night we put 5 buckets of fermented wheat in, and next day there were 240 again. Late in the afternoon we took another 42 in the South and did not feed that night at all. On the morning of 13th there were 440 ducks and before breakfast we left 90 ducks in the West as the birds were not properly settled. At about 11.0 a.m. there seemed to be 50 in the West when we spied from the gazebo. We decided to catch them and

PROGRESS OF TOTAL CATCH IN DECOY 1947-51



P. and I went round. P. showed. The pipe seemed full, and it took some minutes to get them into the tunnel net. Unfortunately we rose the pool in so doing, but it was obviously a record catch. It took about $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours to ring them, having herded about a third of them back into the tunnel net taken off the South pipe. The total catch was 145 ducks, and they had pretty well filled the one tunnel net in the first instance. Two wigeon, one teal and the rest mallards (only 11 recaptures). . . . After the catch there were only 70 birds on the pool. For the next two mornings, after night feeding, there were over 200 birds on, but on each day some disturbance put them off in mid-morning. On 16th September (no feed the night before) we caught 50 in the West after breakfast. It did not upset them much, but a tractor backfire rose the pool while we were still ringing. (Only two recaptures, one from last year.) In the afternoon I took 14 more, including five Pintails, and brought the day total to 64. That night and on the morning of 17th September there was a gale and only about 50 ducks on the pool. . . . We caught 32, and on the following day 30, then the pool was rested until 22nd. For two days there had been about 300 on all day and on 22nd there were 410, but they were unaccountably disturbed, leaving under 170. We took 25 in the evening, and next morning, 23rd September, there were about 220. We made simultaneous catches by a new technique in South and West and caught 24 and 55 respectively, but for our 79 we raised the pool. . . . Next morning we did the same again. I went to the South and waited near the show place until I heard the birds flush in the West, then I showed and ran my pipe. My catch was only 14, but the others got 61'.

Thus in two weeks 596 ducks had been caught—only 13 short of the total for the whole of the previous season.

Duck catching at this rate must compare very favourably with the best decoys in this country and even with those in Holland, and not many catches of 145 at one run can have been made in recent years in any decoys. If only the standard could have been maintained through the season! But it was not to be. The thousand was reached as early as 28th October, but the next five months yielded only 203.

The numbers of each species are shown in Table III. For the first season since the decoy was repaired in 1946, no Garganey was taken.

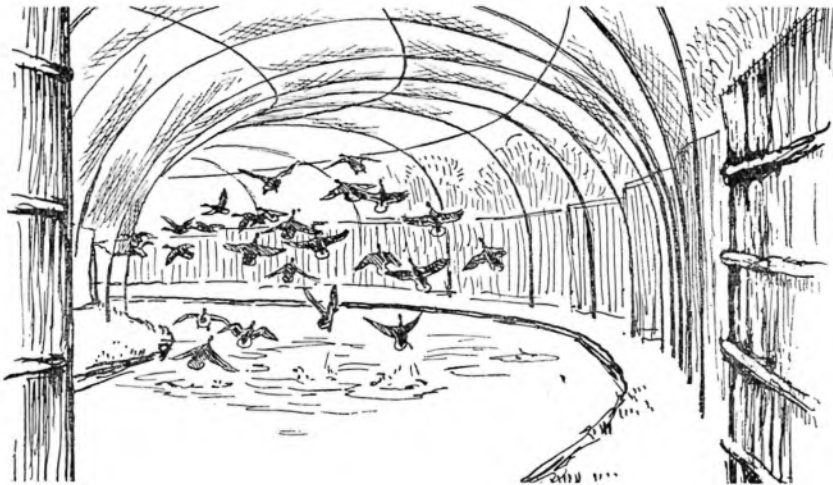


TABLE III—CATCH AND RINGING FIGURES

		1946-47	1947-48	1948-49	1949-50	1950-51	Total
Mallard	Ringed ..	3	64	102	410	802	1381
	Recaptures ..	—	6	19	71	222	318
	Total catch ..	3	70	121	481	1024	1699
	Recoveries ..	1	8	12	32	*43	96
Teal	Ringed ..	2	24	24	56	98	204
	Recaptures ..	—	—	7	2	12	21
	Total catch ..	2	25	31	58	110	225
	Recoveries ..	—	4	1	8	4	17
Wigeon	Ringed ..	—	19	52	19	4	94
	Recaptures ..	—	—	20	2	2	24
	Total catch ..	—	21	72	21	6	120
	Recoveries ..	—	5	8	3	—	16
Pintail	Ringed ..	—	2	13	17	36	68
	Recaptures ..	—	1	4	5	7	17
	Total catch ..	—	3	17	22	43	85
	Recoveries ..	—	—	1	—	1	2
Shoveler	Ringed ..	—	9	26	23	18	76
	Recaptures ..	—	—	—	3	2	5
	Total catch ..	—	9	26	26	20	81
	Recoveries ..	—	6	5	3	1	15
Garganey	Ringed ..	1	2	1	1	—	5
	Recaptures ..	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Total catch ..	1	5	2	1	—	9
	Recoveries ..	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	Ringed ..	6	120	218	526	958	1828
	Recaptures ..	—	7	50	83	245	385
	Total catch ..	6	133	269	609	1203	2220
	Recoveries ..	1	23	27	46	49	146

* The recovery figures will increase with the passage of time. Those shown for 1950-51 represent recoveries in the same season as that in which they were ringed.

TABLE IV—METHODS OF CAPTURE IN DECOY

Seasons	Without Dog				With Dog				Total		
	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Aver. No. of Ducks per catch	Per cent. of total catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Aver. No. of Ducks per catch	Per cent. of total catch	No. of Ducks	No. of Catches	Aver. No. of Ducks per catch
1946-47 ..	280	148	1.9	68.6	128	33	3.9	31.4	408	181	2.3
1947-48 ..											
1948-49 ..											
1949-50 ..											
1950-51 ..	1119	101	11.2	93.0	84	13	6.5	7.0	1203	114	10.6
Grand Total	1831	350	5.3	82.4	389	76	5	17.6	2220	426	5.2



STATUS OF DUCKS

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

No information on size of local breeding population. The population was at a peak in June, with a maximum of 254 on 27th. In the second half of July the adult numbers declined abruptly from 200 on 16th to 45 on 19th, rose again to 218 by 21st, on 23rd fell to 44, and to 6 on 27th, rose temporarily to 41 on 31st, but fell below 20 in early August. These figures accord with current theories that Shelducks perform a moult migration at this period, many of them going to the Heligoland Bight. Few juveniles were seen, 61 on 27th August being the most, and these nearly all left the area in mid-September, so that the population (of both adults and young) totalled less than 20 from late September to the beginning of January. There was a gradual increase in January and February to about 80 birds, at which level the population remained until the third week of April when a rapid increase took place (from 68 on 22nd to 210 on 24th).

PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

Numbers seen on the river during the winter smaller than in the previous season : highest counts 127 on 30th December, 90, 6th February. Full-winged birds in the pens and the decoy exceeded 50 on several occasions, but included some hand-reared birds.

TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

Numbers on river in autumn and early winter comparatively small, increasing to 550 by 10th December and remaining high until the beginning of April, with c.1100, 16th February, and 960, 11th March, the highest counts. Most numerous in the decoy in late January and February (maximum 65 on 22nd January).

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

As in previous years, abundant on river and in decoy in autumn but comparatively few present after mid-December. Highest counts on river 1250, 29th August, c.1350, 10th September : in decoy, c.430, 13th, and c.380, 22nd September. After mid-December not more than 150 on river and 60 in decoy.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

Some undoubtedly wild birds in pens during winter, but presence of a number of full-winged hand-reared birds prevented adequate recording of numbers. Six, 31st December, most probably wild.

WIGEON (*Anas penelope*)

Up to 1250 (31st December) on estuary November to January : few at other times. Very few seen in decoy this season, 12, 1st February, the most.

GARGANEY (*Anas querquedula*)

A male in decoy 26th and 27th May, 1950 ; a female in pens 2nd to 11th September ; a pair in decoy 12th April, 1951.

SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

Seen on estuary from mid-August to early April, 20, 13th August and 13th October, the most. Despite the presence of some hand-reared birds, not so numerous in decoy as in previous season, 25 on 18th October the maximum and numbers subsequently very small except for 19-21 in first week of December.

POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*)

Seven (six males) on river 10th January. One male in decoy, 19th February.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*)

One on river 16th February. One in decoy 26th September, 23rd and 24th October, (♂) (subsequently in pens) mid-November until following summer (caught and ringed 26th December) ; another ♂ 5th February.

RINGING AND RECOVERIES

As in previous years the Trust has carried out its ringing activities for the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee and both ducks and geese have been available to the Committee's Duck Adoption Scheme. The standard British Trust for Ornithology rings were used, carrying the address of the British Museum of Natural History, London.

The most important recoveries have been the 4 Whitefronts reported from Russia. Three of these were from known breeding grounds of the species—the Island of Kolguev and the Kanin Peninsula, both to the east of the White Sea. The fourth, however, was much more unexpected. Ringed, with the others, at the New Grounds at the end of February, it was recovered near Kursk in Southern Russia on 4th April. If this should indicate a regular route between wintering and breeding grounds it would be very strange and new. On the other hand it is perhaps more likely that it is a stray bird far from the normal migration line of the New Grounds flocks.

The long-distance record for any bird ringed at the New Grounds is now held by a Wigeon which was recovered near Novosibirsk in September, 1949, having been ringed at Slimbridge in the same month two years before. Novosibirsk is in 77°40'E, some 1,000 miles east of the Ural Mountains.

Another Wigeon was found at the mouth of the River Petchora. Two Mallards, usually regarded as less extensive travellers, were recovered in W. Finland.

Full details of the numbers ringed and the recoveries are shown in the four tables which follow.