

WILD DUCKS

THE name of the decoy at the New Grounds by which it has always been described is Berkeley New Decoy. It was built in 1843 and called the New Decoy to distinguish it from the Old Decoy, apparently built only a few years before a mile to the west of the Trust's Headquarters. Our decoy pool is six miles from Berkeley (although only one and a half miles from Slimbridge), but being a part of the Berkeley Estate its ancient title is quite appropriate. Since the Trust has now become associated with Borough Fen Decoy near Peterborough, the oldest working decoy in the country, it is necessary to avoid confusion by giving the decoy at the New Grounds its ancient and proper title, thus :

BERKELEY NEW DECOY

The Lead

Since the Trust was formed in 1946, the numbers of ducks using the decoy pool have increased from year to year *until* the past winter, when, quite suddenly, they dropped back to the standards of 1948-49. Late July and August are important and formative months in building up the decoy lead and during that period in 1951 much disturbance was caused by the building of the road in the Big Pen. Lorries discharged loads and a steam roller was operating within fifty yards of the pool. Then, too, there were fewer stubble fields in the near neighbourhood of the Trust, and perhaps for this reason there were in the early autumn about one-third of the number of ducks which had been present on the estuary in the two previous autumns. Finally the open weather on the Continent undoubtedly reduced the influx of fresh birds after Christmas. A combination of all these influences was probably responsible for the poor leads in the 1951-52 season. For example, the highest count in the decoy in September was thirty-five ducks, compared with 440 in the previous September. During the whole of the season the highest count of ducks on the pool was only ninety-nine birds, whereas, in the winter before, over a hundred were recorded on at least one day in each of the months of September, October, November, December and January.

The Catch

The lead was bad but the catch was even worse. A season total of 301 compares very unfavourably with 1203 in the previous season and 609 the year before. The 301 included a larger proportion of recaptures (84) than in previous years, so that the number of birds ringed (which, of course, is the most important figure) was only 217 compared with 958 in 1950-51 and 528 in 1949-50. Indeed, the total was one less than in 1948-49 when 269 were caught and 218 ringed (51 recaptures).

During the winter a new catching technique for frosty weather was used successfully on one occasion. One of the perennial problems of decoys is to keep the water open in the pipes during frost. Normally a small patch is kept open by the ducks themselves, either in the middle of the pool or under one of the banks well outside the pipes. In some decoys early-morning ice-breaking is a standard practice, but this has disadvantages. The decoy ducks are usually scared by the clattering and do not immediately come to the open water, which freezes over again during dawn when the wild ducks are returning to the pool and before they have found it and started to keep it open by their own movement. In some decoys the flow of the inlet is enough to prevent freezing in all but the hardest weather, but this is not swift enough in Berkeley New Decoy.

There was no very heavy frost on the Severn Estuary last winter, nevertheless the ponds were frozen very frequently in the mornings during January and the first half of February. On 18 January a hose-pipe was led from a tap beside a drinking trough to the mouth of the North Pipe—a distance of about fifty yards—and the tap was left running overnight. On the following morning a pool was still open under the first hoops and in it were all the Teal then using the pond. When the Curator 'showed' twenty-two flew up the pipe and were caught.

This was the best catch of the season—the next best being 18 (8 Mallards, 2 Teal and 8 Pintails). This was a sad come-down after the catches of the previous season. In 1950-51 the best catch, at one run, was 145, followed by catches of 62, 61, 55, 50, 42, 42, 36, 30, 27, 25, 25, 24 and three catches of 20.

A common phenomenon in the figures of decoy catches in this country and in Holland is the striking fluctuation from year to year. In most decoy records there is one year in which the catch was very much greater than in any other. That the 1203 of 1950-51 was such a flash-in-the-pan is not impossible, although three seasons in the 109-year history of the decoy yielded larger totals—1853-54 with 1410, 1861-62 with 1295 and 1899-1900 with 1273.

We are still hopeful, therefore, that a good year will enable us to catch 1500 ducks and make the decoy more efficient than it was in the olden days, when, of course, ducks were much more numerous than they are today. But the record total of 1410 ducks were all killed for eating, so that, in a fair comparison, recaptures cannot be counted (as in 1854 they would have been killed at the first capture). Thus it is the figure of 958 ducks ringed which must be boosted to exceed the record of ninety-nine years ago.

Early indications of a good breeding season in the spring of 1952 give hopes of greater success in the coming winter in the decoy.

TABLE XII
CATCH AND RINGING FIGURES IN BERKELEY NEW DECOY

		1946- 47	1947- 48	1948- 49	1949- 50	1950- 51	1951- 52	Total
Mallard	Ringed	3	64	102	410	802	108	1489
	Recaptures	—	6	19	71	222	35	353
	Total Catch	3	70	121	481	1024	143	1842
	Recoveries	1	9	15	38	80	4	147
Teal	Ringed	2	24	24	56	98	77	281
	Recaptures	—	—	7	2	12	10	31
	Total Catch	2	25	31	58	110	87	313
	Recoveries	—	4	1	8	16	2	31
Wigeon	Ringed	—	19	52	19	4	—	94
	Recaptures	—	—	20	2	2	—	24
	Total Catch	—	21	72	21	6	—	120
	Recoveries	—	5	9	4	—	—	18
Pintail	Ringed	—	2	13	17	36	22	90
	Recaptures	—	1	4	5	7	9	26
	Total Catch	—	3	17	22	43	31	116
	Recoveries	—	—	1	1	5	1	8
Shoveler	Ringed	—	9	26	23	18	7	83
	Recaptures	—	—	—	3	2	2	7
	Total Catch	—	9	26	26	20	9	90
	Recoveries	—	6	5	4	2	1	18
Garganey	Ringed	1	2	1	1	—	—	5
	Recaptures	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Total Catch	1	5	2	1	—	—	9
	Recoveries	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total	Ringed	6	120	218	526	958	214	2042
	Recaptures	—	7	50	83	245	56	441
	Total Catch	6	133	269	609	1203	270	2490
	Recoveries	1	24	31	55	103	8	222

TABLE XIII — PROPORTION OF RECOVERIES OF DUCKS RINGED SINCE 1946 (Omitting Trust-reared birds)

Species	Total Number Ringed	Number Recovered		Per cent. Recovered		Total
		In same Season	Subsequently	In same Season	Subsequently*	
Mallard	1489	77	70	5.2	5.1	9.9
Teal	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wigeon	94	5	13	5.3	13.8	19.1
Pintail	107	3	5	2.8	6.1	7.5
Shoveler	84	10	8	12.0	10.5	21.7

* This percentage excludes birds (included in Column 1) which have only carried rings for one season and could not therefore yet have been recovered subsequent to the season in which they were ringed.

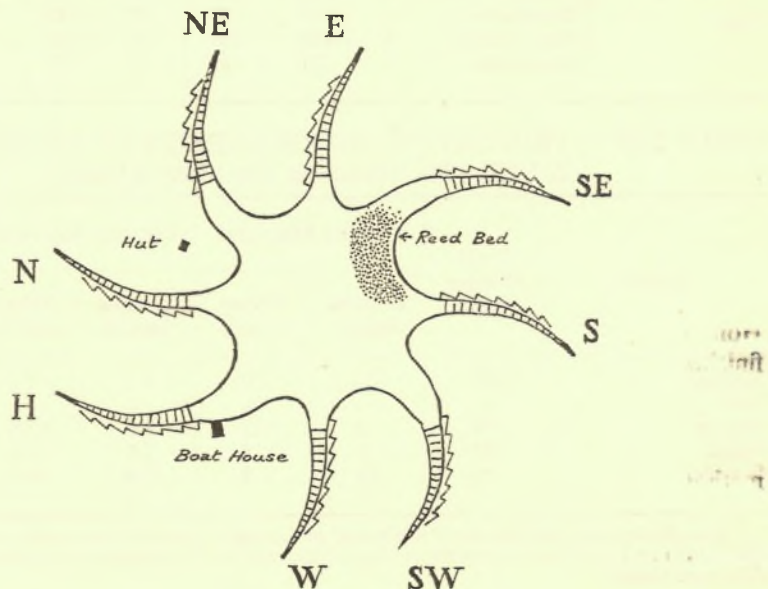
BOROUGH FEN DECOY

The Trust has now undertaken the management and financing of the ringing effort at this ancient decoy, which was built, so far as is known, about 1630. Of the eight decoys still working in Britain, this is almost certainly the oldest. The others, in approximate order of construction, are The Grange in Essex, Boarstal in Buckinghamshire, Fritton in Suffolk, Abbotsbury in Dorset, Orierton in Pembrokeshire, Berkeley New Decoy in Gloucestershire and Orwell Park in Suffolk. Borough Fen has also the largest number of pipes still working—eight. The decoy is beautifully laid out with the pipes in a star-shaped pattern round a two and a half-acre pool. It is not uncommon to see over 1000 ducks on the pool and as many as 3000 have been recorded on this small sheet of water.

The decoy is now operated by Mr Billy Williams. A Williams has been its decoyman ever since it was built. In good seasons a catch of between three and four thousand birds is made. During the First World War 16,000 ducks were caught in one winter, but no other catch of more than 7000 is recorded. The drainage of the surrounding fens has recently reduced the average annual catches, but great numbers of ducks still frequent the decoy at suitable times in the winter.

Mr Williams has been ringing all ducks other than Mallards for some time past. He cannot, however, afford to do so unless the market price can be found elsewhere. For some years a subsidy was provided by the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee. In 1951 the Committee decided that it could no longer continue the arrangement, and the Trust undertook it instead. Thus the season of 1951-52 was the first in which the Trust became officially associated with Borough Fen Decoy—although in 1932 and 1933 the Director lived there for more than a year and since that time he has kept in close touch with the decoy where his first knowledge and experience of decoymanship were acquired.

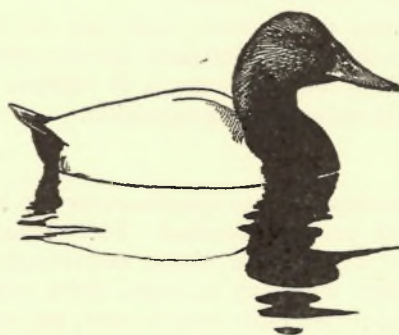
Ringed ducks from other sources for the use of the Wildfowl Inquiry Committee's Duck Adoption Scheme (Berkeley New Decoy was one of them) were



in short supply during the winter of 1951-52 and some of the Borough Fen birds were used. For these the Committee reimbursed the Trust with two shillings and sixpence per bird which helped to reduce the cost of the ringing, and for which the Trust is most grateful.

Mr Williams suffered some ill-health during the decoy season. Nevertheless he ringed the satisfactory total of 914 Teal, four Mallards, eight Shovelers and a Pintail.

If sufficient funds could be made available for this important ringing work it would be possible for *all* the ducks caught at Borough Fen to be ringed (instead of only other species than Mallards). This would be a worthwhile contribution towards an increase in the stocks of ducks, and an increase also in the various kinds of knowledge which can be derived from ringing. Should the Trust achieve the financial position from which it could be done, Mr Williams would welcome the change of function of this fine old decoy to an 'all-ringing' station.



THE DELTA DECOY

Co-operation between the Trust and the Delta Waterfowl Research Station in Manitoba, Canada, has always been close. The Director has visited Delta three times and has maintained close contact with Mr H. Albert Hochbaum, Director of the Delta Station. In 1948 the idea of a decoy pipe on the edge of the pond in front of the station was suggested and during the winter the first excavations were made. It was not until the spring of 1951 that the construction was finally completed under the supervision of Dr Robert A. McCabe of the University of Wisconsin, assisted by Mr Charles H. Southwick. The decoy was operated by Mr Nan Mulder, a professional decoyman from Holland.

In the first year 1400 ducks were caught and ringed. As will be seen from the photographs, the Delta pipe follows the standard pattern designed in South Holland in the late sixteenth century. It is extremely well built and neatly finished.

It is particularly pleasant that the Trust should have been instrumental in establishing the first duck decoy in the New World. Its success may very possibly lead to the construction of other decoys in North America, for the method is very well suited to the extensive ringing programme, now being undertaken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and by many other State and private organizations. 'Banding,' as it is called in North America, is regarded as an integral part of the scientific management of wildfowl.

STATUS OF DUCKS ON SEVERN ESTUARY

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

A large series of counts throughout the year showed that the pattern of change in numbers of this species on the estuary, which had been established by observations in earlier years, was adhered to in a general way. Thus, maximum numbers in early summer (i.e., before the onset of moult-migration) were 160 on 3 May and 183 on 21 June ; during the first half of July the adult population was about 110 ; after a fall to sixty-four on 14 July it rose to 142 on 19 July, then declined until less than ten remained at the beginning of August. Adult numbers remained very small until the end of December. During January and February the total of adults and first-winter birds varied between twenty-two and fifty-five, but rose in March to a peak of 156 on 10 March. The highest count in April was 112 on 10 and 13 April.

The highest count of young birds was eighty-seven on 20 July ; forty-six was the next highest (27 July, 18 August).

The great fluctuations in numbers from day to day, which repeatedly occurred, remain very difficult to interpret satisfactorily : it is not yet clear whether these result from local movements or whether they indicate that the population is constantly changing in composition.

PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

Over seventy on the estuary from mid-December to late February ; 109 on 29 January, the largest number recorded. Full-winged birds frequented the pens and the decoy for much of the winter, and though it was not possible to determine their numbers with any accuracy there were over fifty on many occasions. Some hand-reared birds were present, but represented only a small part of the total.

TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

Numbers on the river showed changes paralleling those of the previous two winters, the species being abundant from early December to the end of March. A count of 1700 on 31 December was the highest yet recorded, but there were thought to be even more on 18 February (though it was not possible to make a satisfactory count). The numbers frequenting the decoy fluctuated widely, with peaks of forty-eight on 18 January and fifty-six on 16 February. There was no sign of an early autumn passage like that of September 1949.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Much less plentiful in autumn than in previous years (highest autumn count 440 1 September, compared with c.1350 10 September 1950, and c.1300 25 September 1949). Information on mid-winter population rather meagre : largest estimates c.1100 1 December and c.900 28 January, but most estimates much smaller. Few present after last week in February. Largest number seen in decoy only sixty-four, 3 November and 1 December (cf. c.430 13 September 1950).

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

Not recorded on estuary. Full-winged birds in the pens throughout the year, mostly hand-reared or the progeny of hand-reared birds breeding locally, but several apparently wild winter visitors.

WIGEON (*Anas penelope*)

Rather more numerous on estuary in autumn than in previous years : 240 as early as 21 October, increasing rapidly in second week of November to 1180 on 16 November. Subsequently plentiful until mid-February (c. 1350 28 January), when numbers fell rapidly to some 250, more slowly thereafter. Twelve were still present at the end of April. Very few seen in the decoy.

GARGANEY (*Anas querquedula*)

Single males in decoy 5 May, Rushy Pen 9 June and decoy 4 September.

SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

A male seen on river 21 June. No other records until early November, but small numbers then seen frequently until early April (thirty-five 30 December, the maximum). Some in decoy on most days from mid-August to mid-January (thirteen the most) and others in the pens, but some of the latter hand-reared.

POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*)

Twenty-six on river 18 November, two 27 January, fifty-five 29 January, thirty-nine 5 February (on the latter two days there was widespread frost). A female in decoy 1 October.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*)

Six males on river 27 January and four 29 January, twenty-four (ten males 5 February). One male in decoy 21 January.

