

## THE WILDFOWLER'S ASSOCIATION'S CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

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I welcome the opportunity of being invited to contribute an article on the work of the Wildfowlers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, the more since the invitation recognises, in particular, the contribution we are making in the interests of conservation of wildfowl, and the efforts being made to educate the new entrant to the sport along the proper and recognised path of true gun sportsmanship.

W.A.G.B.I., formed in 1908, has always appreciated the need for reserves or refuges for wildfowl but until recent years has found itself unable to assist in their creation since it felt that in a number of cases there was a likelihood of proposals emanating from persons who were more interested in stopping shooting altogether than catering for the genuine needs of wildfowl. W.A.G.B.I. also recognises the need to control the activities of irresponsible persons whether carrying a gun in the guise of a shooting man or carrying binoculars in the guise of a bird watcher.

The coming together of wildfowlers and naturalists under the auspices of the Nature Conservancy has led to the establishment of a certain amount of confidence, which is growing, and W.A.G.B.I. does recognise that one of its main responsibilities is the provision of sensible and properly sited refuges which will cause the least inconvenience to the genuine wildfowler since without proper provision growing industrialisation, drainage of habitat and the ever-increasing demands in the interests of sailing, fishing, water skiing etc. will, in a very short space of time, mean that the minimum level of undisturbed waters will have been reached. For this reason W.A.G.B.I. is prepared to co-operate for this purpose with persons and organisations which have no axe to grind and which are prepared to make reasonable allowance for the wildfowler's point of view. W.A.G.B.I., accordingly, has been, and is, working in close harmony with the Trust and Nature Conservancy on an overall review covering the entire country, and we have already made the first approaches to those of our affiliated local clubs and associations in whose areas refuges have been suggested. The reactions generally have been excellent, with the affected organisations submitting their own suggested schemes.

The entire success of the National Wildfowl Refuge Scheme depends upon a number of basic principles and in order to name them in their proper sequence I would say that firstly the confidence and assent of the affected local club or association is essential. This, so far, has been forthcoming, since on each occasion we have experienced a desire by the true wildfowlers to see that the sport in its proper form be maintained and, therefore, they are eager to see certain areas closed to so called 'fowlers' who, so very frequently, are nothing more than 'gun toting' irresponsibles who have little or no regard for the law, or respect for the real spirit of an ancient but honourable sport.

Other basic principles are that a statutory refuge shall be completely effective and inviolate and to this end we are insisting that every refuge shall be properly wardened and maintained by a joint committee comprising, in

equal representation, sportsmen and naturalists. Finally, all refuges must have the full support of the police which hitherto, in certain areas, has not been as effective as it might have been. Unless a refuge can be safeguarded we are, all of us, wasting our time.

The wildfowler will support any reasonable and sensible scheme that in turn will provide more 'fowl but what he will not tolerate is underhand and completely insincere motives. He realises, as does the enlightened conservationist, that only by joint action can the wildfowl of these islands truly prosper and it is this vital factor that must be continually recognised and strengthened. However, the wildfowler is also a practical conservationist with more and more of our clubs and members coming to realise the importance of, and indeed tremendous satisfaction in, 'putting back.' They have taken the place of the disappearing estate owner who reared duck in large numbers prior to the last war.

The W.A.G.B.I. sponsored conservation programme is based upon a series of reserves controlled by local clubs and associations. These are non-statutory and therefore have no connection with the national reserves or refuges already referred to but are used for establishing hand-reared wildfowl in order that the local nesting and winter holding potential shall be improved. The scheme is a means of improving sport in areas beyond the confines of reserves. Lakes, bogs, saltings and ballast waters already are in use and are proving of the greatest value, particularly in the case of the latter. It is on new ballast waters that experiments in habitat improvement are being carried out and with natural habitats all the while decreasing in both size and number the importance of such experiments can be appreciated.

The rearing and release of Mallard on to reserves has been given top priority by The Wildfowlers' Association since its importance affects us all. So also has the all-important ringing of released duck, providing a vast additional potential of interest both elementary and scientific. In 1958 when the scheme formally began, 1,043 mallard were liberated with a 4.6% first year recovery rate, whilst in 1959 releases totalled 3,389 with a 4.5% first year recovery rate. Figures for 1960 are not yet complete but it is hoped that the target of 5,000 releases will have been achieved.

Ringing recoveries have confirmed that the majority of birds released remain fairly sedentary, the low recovery rates indicating the true value of local reserves. 86% of recoveries are in the county of release, but the remainder have been proved to disperse far more widely than was expected of them, since recovery details have been forwarded from Latvia, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Holland and Belgium, no doubt most of these being abmigrants. Even so a surprising number of recoveries have been made abroad in the autumn of the year of release. Recoveries within the British Isles show that the movements represent a dispersal in all directions but with an easterly bias. Studies are now progressing into the breeding successes of hand-reared birds, into summer mortality and whether there are any significant differences resulting from different rearing methods or between the sexes, and in due course movements of hand-reared birds will be compared with those that are wild-caught. On a smaller scale the scheme may well be extended to other species of duck, the Gadwall being an obvious choice and one which is already being kept in captivity by some of our local associations.

In 1957 the task of removing surplus Canada geese from estates and their subsequent transportation to new areas was handed over to the Wildfowlers' Association by the Wildfowl Trust since which time some hundreds of geese have been moved, adults and young being caught up during the flightless period in late June and July. However, the dangers of this scheme are fully realised, since the quick build up of flocks might well become a menace to agriculture, but to date their controlled introduction and establishment in new areas has proved popular and interesting, not only to wildfowlers and naturalists alike but to the general public also. Canada Geese nesting on artificial rafts placed on ballast water reserves have already been recorded in an early Wildfowl Trust Annual Report.

As a result of the Canada Goose scheme useful experience has been obtained which now has a bearing on our scheme to reintroduce the Greylag into England as a truly wild but home breeding goose. In the summer of 1959 the scheme was initiated with the catching up of some birds from a feral flock in the North of Scotland which have now been established in three sites in England which are wild in the extreme.

From rearing to a form of research that could not have been carried out without the assistance of the wildfowler, mention must be made of the Viscera scheme now, in 1960/61, in its fourth year of operation, during which time well over 2000 specimens have been supplied for food analysis investigations. Initially the majority of these specimens came from Kent and it is there that the first practical results are becoming apparent in the form of a planting scheme based on food preferences as shown by viscera analysis. It would appear that the possibilities resulting from this close co-operation between our two organisations are both manifold and exciting.

The Wildfowlers' Association, then, is advancing along sound lines in the field of conservation but there are many other aspects claiming its time and attention, the chief of which is the constant education of the new entrant to the sport of wildfowling, since we believe that the whole future of the sport depends upon the younger element having a clear understanding of the true art of wildfowling. He must be able, at a glance, to recognise each bird that he is likely to encounter which, coupled with a sound grounding of what is and is not protected, will enable him to remain on the right side of the law. He must know the seasons and abide by them just as he must know when a bird is in range or not. The new—and not so new—entrant must have a sound knowledge in safe gun handling, marshcraft and the necessary equipment which includes life saving gear such as a torch, whistle, compass, etc. He must understand and be able to recognise the foreshore dangers such as tide, fog and wind and above all he must learn to realise that greed is not necessarily the true hallmark of a good 'fowler. 50 geese under the moon in one night may prove him to be a good shot but it does not mean that he has the true interests of the sport at heart.

These then, and others, are some of the vital matters that W.A.G.B.I., through its local affiliated branches, of which there is a total of close on 120 (January, 1961), is trying to encourage and we are more than pleased that our efforts are being recognised and that they are leading to mutual co-operation, understanding and tolerance.