

Wildfowl Counts in the British Isles

D.G. SALMON

1985–86 was the 39th season of the U.K. National Wildfowl Counts, organised by the Wildfowl Trust under contract to the Nature Conservancy Council. All the swans, geese and ducks are covered, together with Great Crested and Little Grebe, Cormorant and Coot, each month from September to March, at as many coastal and inland localities as possible in the U.K. Supplementary censuses of several goose species are undertaken to include birds feeding on fields by day. In addition to the regular counts, a Late Summer Survey

was carried out in 1985, between July 15th and August 31st. In all, a record 2,100 sites were visited during 1985–86. There was a cold spell from late January to early March, but the numbers of several species were apparently already high before this began, perhaps because of brief cold snaps on the Continent. Table 1 shows the highest monthly counts for each species in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Counts of Great Crested Grebes were much lower than in 1984–85, although a larger than usual proportion were found on

Table 1. Peak total counts of wildfowl in 1985-86

NB: Totals deriving from full censuses are marked with an asterisk; other totals probably underestimate the actual numbers present.

| | Great Britain | N. Ireland |
|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | 6,290 (Sep) | 1,410 (Mar) |
| Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i> | 8,940 (Jan) | 1,010 (Nov) |
| Bewick's Swan <i>C. columbianus bewickii</i> | 7,720 (Jan) | 470 (Jan) |
| Whooper Swan <i>C. cygnus</i> | 5,140 (Jan) * | 3,330 (Nov) * |
| Bean Goose <i>Anser fabalis</i> | 290 (Jan) | 0 |
| Pink-footed Goose <i>A. brachyrhynchus</i> | 130,350 (Nov) * | 4 (Feb) |
| Eur. White-fronted G. <i>A. a. albifrons</i> | 7,150 (Jan) | 0 |
| Gd. White-fronted G. <i>A. a. flavirostris</i> | 11,030 (Nov) * | 73 (Jan) |
| Greylag Goose <i>A. anser</i> (incl. feral) | 117,590 (Nov) * | 1,070 (Feb) |
| Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis</i> | 31,400 (Sep) | 550 (Feb) |
| Barnacle Goose <i>B. leucopsis</i> : Islay | 19,230 (Dec) * | |
| Solway | 10,400 (Oct) * | |
| Dark-bellied Brent G. <i>B. b. bernicla</i> | 90,510 (Dec) * | 0 |
| Light-bellied Brent Goose <i>B. b. hrota</i> | 2,810 (Dec) | 17,580 (Oct) |
| Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> | 75,030 (Jan) | 3,110 (Feb) |
| Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i> | 281,700 (Jan) | 14,330 (Oct) |
| Gadwall <i>A. strepera</i> | 5,130 (Dec) | 120 (Dec) |
| Teal <i>A. crecca</i> | 91,510 (Dec) | 4,710 (Dec) |
| Mallard <i>A. platyrhynchos</i> | 195,960 (Dec) | 6,340 (Dec) |
| Pintail <i>A. acuta</i> | 26,640 (Dec) | 420 (Feb) |
| Shoveler <i>A. clypeata</i> | 7,950 (Oct) | 170 (Dec) |
| Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i> | 34,000 (Jan) | 17,500 (Nov) |
| Tufted Duck <i>A. fuligula</i> | 49,020 (Dec) | 6,840 (Jan) |
| Scaup <i>A. marila</i> | 2,720 (Dec) | 1,980 (Mar) |
| Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | 15,600 (Oct) | 140 (Sep) |
| Long-tailed Duck <i>Clangula hyemalis</i> | 4,080 (Mar) | 20 (Jan) |
| Common Scoter <i>Melanitta nigra</i> | 6,210 (Dec) | 2,720 (Jan) |
| Velvet Scoter <i>M. fusca</i> | 680 (Oct) | 5 (Jan) |
| Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i> | 11,250 (Jan) | 5,610 (Mar) |
| Smew <i>Mergus albellus</i> | 170 (Feb) | 2 (Feb) |
| Red-breasted Merganser <i>M. serrator</i> | 4,620 (Jan) | 730 (Sep) |
| Goosander <i>M. merganser</i> | 3,550 (Jan/Feb) | 2 (Jan) |
| Ruddy Duck <i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i> | 2,030 (Jan) | 27 (Feb) |
| Coot <i>Fulica atra</i> | 94,290 (Nov) | 2,630 (Nov) |

*Full census result

the coast in February, having presumably moved from frozen inland waters. As usual the highest count was at Rutland Water, with 705 in September. The total count of Bewick's Swans reached a record 7,700 in January, including 4,700 on the Ouse Washes. There was a remarkable gathering of 2,600 Whooper Swans at Lough Foyle, Co. Londonderry, in November – 16% of the Icelandic breeding population.

Despite only average breeding success, with 13.4% young in the autumn flocks, a record 130,000 Pink-footed Geese were found in November. A total of 22,500 Greenland White-fronted Geese were found in Britain and Ireland in November, constituting the entire world population of this sub-species. The British flocks contained 26.7% young, while there were 34.4% at Wexford Slobs and 22.6% in the rest of Ireland. 110,000 Icelandic Greylag Geese were found in northern Britain in November, including 11.2% young. The Islay Barnacle Geese, representing the majority of the Greenland breeding population, contained 10.7% young, while those on the Solway, comprising the entire Svalbard population, included 9.6%. Unusually, the Dark-bellied Brent Geese breeding in Siberia had neither a "bumper" breeding season nor a complete failure in 1985; the winter flocks in southern England contained 27% young. A count of 23,000 on The Wash in March represented 12% of the world population. The Wash was not counted in February, and there were possibly more Dark-bellied Brent in Britain in that month than any other. An estimate of 24,100 was made for the numbers of Light-bellied Brent Geese in the whole of Ireland, following a census in November (M. O'Briain). The autumn gathering at Strangford Lough, Co. Down, comprised 15,900 in October.

The January total of 75,000 Shelducks in Britain was the highest on record. The Wash held 21,300 in December – 8.5% of the north-west European population. The January total of 280,000 Wigeon in Britain was not far below the record level of 1984–85, and included 24,150 on the Ribble Estuary. The Ouse Washes held 34,500 in March. In Northern Ireland, Lough Foyle carried 12,300 in October. An amazing 1,600 Gadwall were counted on Rutland Water in November, by far the highest

count of this species ever made in the U.K. The first complete counts of the Lough Neagh/Lough Beg basin in Northern Ireland for several years revealed 17,300 Pochard in November, 6,400 Tufted Duck in January, 1,700 Scaup in March and 4,850 Goldeneye in November. In each case these were the highest counts in the U.K., the Pochard representing 5% of the estimated north-west European population. No less than 32,000 Tufted Duck were found in Britain during the Late Summer Survey, a total exceeded only by Mallard and Coot. The October count of Red-breasted Mergansers included 1,050 off Tentsmuir, Fife. In December there were 1,700 Goosanders in the Beaully Firth, Inverness. The total number of Ruddy Ducks counted exceeded 2,000 for the first time, with 680 at Chew Valley Lake, Avon. As usual Abberton Reservoir, Essex, held by far the largest concentration of Coot – 9,450 in November.

The provisional results of the 1986–87 goose censuses are shown in Table 2. These may be subject to revision when the full season's data have been received.

Table 2. Provisional results of the 1986–87 goose censuses

| | Total | Month | % Young |
|-----------------------------|----------|-------|---------|
| Pink-footed Goose | 136,000 | Nov | 15.3 |
| Greylag Goose | 102,000* | Nov | 19.0 |
| Barnacle Goose: | | | |
| Svalbard | 10,500 | Nov | 11.9 |
| Islay | 23,900 | Oct | 15.5 |
| Dark-bellied Brent Goose | 89,000 | Jan | 0.1 |

*G.B. (excl. feral)

The results of the 1985–86 National Wildfowl Counts are given in much fuller detail, together with those of the BTO's Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, in "Wildfowl and Wader Counts 1985-86", obtainable from Slimbridge. The second edition of "Wildfowl in Great Britain", a massive review of the results of the counts since 1960, and of all aspects of the conservation of Britain's wildfowl, published by Cambridge University Press in 1986, is also obtainable from Slimbridge.