

Borough Fen Decoy, 1966

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The winter of 1965-66 was generally wet and open, and catches of duck during January were all small. Teal used the Decoy pool in quite substantial numbers at this time but only a few were caught. The pond was frozen from 11th to 24th January and despite early morning ice-breaking nothing was trapped in this period. The pond was completely clear of ice by 1st February but no duck could be tempted into a pipe by feed or dog until 8th, when two drakes were flushed whilst feeding. The next day 19 were trapped. Two female Gadwall were present until the end of the month but showed no inclination to enter any of the pipes. March is not usually a good catching month at Borough Fen and 1966 was no exception. Numbers present gradually decreased from 40 Teal and 30 Mallard to four of each by the end of the month. So ended a rather mediocre season. The full ringing totals will be found in the table on page 18.

The non-duck highlight of the winter months was a circuit of inspection by five Whooper Swans on 25th January. Finch numbers were fairly constant, and Bramblings totalled 15 on 31st January. Fieldfares and Redwings were winter residents,

both species being seen well into April. The spring return of migrants started on 4th April when 15 Sand Martins were feeding over the pond and two Chiffchaffs were calling in the wood.

Nest record cards were completed for 188 nests, nearly all of passerine species. There was a heavy predation of eggs and young partly from a pair of Magpies which nested in the wood, the first record for eight years. Rats, and possibly a Grey Squirrel, were also thought to be taking their toll. Table I shows the numbers of nests recorded and their fate for the six commonest species.

Seventy nests were examined for parasites, fly larvae and microlepidoptera. As there was a significant difference between 1965 and 1966 in the numbers of fleas, both species and individuals, it was decided to continue this study for a further season before analysing the data.

A total of 650 non-Anatidae were ringed in 1966, including 138 pulli. The species totals will be found in the table on page 19. Nineteen birds were reported as recovered in 1966, and a number of birds were retrapped from previous years. These included two Blackbirds and a Great Spotted Woodpecker, all of which

Table I. Nests at Borough Fen Decoy, 1966.

Species	Total	Deserted	Eggs lost	Young predated	Young reared	Incomplete data
Moorhen	11		4		5	2
Woodpigeon	17	1	5	2	4	5
Song Thrush	28	5	19	1	2	1
Blackbird	18	1	15		2	
Linnet	26	2	17	4	1	2
Tree Sparrow	43		16	2	15	10

Table II. Interesting recoveries of birds, other than Anatidae, notified in 1966.

Song Thrush	Pull	6.7.64	nr Tadcaster, Yorks.	12.5.66	95m NNW
Blackbird	1st yr ♂	9.12.60	Pleuven, Finisterre, France	April 1964	47.54N 4.02W
Blackbird	1st yr ♂	12.2.65	Goudriaan, Zuid Holland, Netherlands	15.3.66	51.54N 4.54E
Starling	1st yr ♂	3.1.63	nr Moscow, U.S.S.R. (killed by cat)	22.5.66	55.45N 37.40E
Linnet	Pull	4.6.65	Taussat-les-Bains, Gironde, France	15.10.65	44.43N 1.04W
Chaffinch	1st yr ♂	10.11.65	Anlo, Drenthe, Netherlands	11.5.66	53.02N 6.42E

had been ringed in 1960. Ringed migrant birds which returned were Spotted Flycatcher, Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler.

Close season maintenance of the Decoy included the building of several new screens and a new backwall to the SW pipe. A new net was fitted to the SE and W pipes. (See Photograph Section p. XI upper.) A fine new headquarters hut, measuring 24 feet by 9 feet, was erected in May and June. This was divided into two sections, one to serve as a store and ringing area. The remaining space is lined and floored and is being utilised as an office and primitive laboratory. It could also be used as temporary sleeping accommodation for visiting research workers.

The Decoy was opened to the public on 21st and 22nd May. One hundred and forty-five people visited including about 40 Members and their guests. Other close season activities included the preparation and manning of an exhibition showing the aims of the Wildfowl Trust at Peterborough Museum in conjunction with National Nature Week.

The 1966-67 duck catching season began on 6th June when two Mallard were dogged into the West pipe, but no more were trapped that month and July produced only 28 ducks from seven catches. August was a frustrating month with a great deal of outside disturbance in the form of pea harvesters on the south-east side. The modern canning process requires the crop to be gathered and into the can within a few hours which means that the machines are often working before first light and the duck have little opportunity to settle in. Good catches were made on 15th (87) and 24th (81) and these helped the August total to 474.

A long series of orientation relay experiments were assisted in early September (p. 88), but despite the time taken by this, there were catches of 109, 90 and 80 ducks on 5th, 6th and 7th respectively, from a total of no more than 1,000 present at one time. Combine harvesters and balers raised the pond at 11.00 a.m. on 13th after 58 had been trapped. These disturbances continued until 19th when the pond was given an opportunity to settle down. The counts to the end of the month varied from 600 to 950. The total of ducks trapped in September was 1,054, rather above the average.

October was a very wet month and five acres of potatoes to the south of the Decoy defied all attempts to lift them. Machinery was constantly getting bogged

down and was finally abandoned in favour of manual picking by a female labour force. They conversed at great length and on a variety of subjects at distances up to 25 yards apart. This, with a SW wind, had a decidedly detrimental effect on the equanimity of the ducks on the pond. All things considered, the October catch of 382 was above expectations.

Foggy mornings in early November reduced the number of ducks using the pond as a daytime roost to double figures. With improved weather after 10th, and fewer disruptions, catching got better with three of over 30 in a day, and four over 20, giving a total for the month of 415. The short days of December give only six hours in which one can decoy ducks. Even so the 200 Mallard and 500 Teal flatly refused to play until after 9th when catches of 11, 15, 15 and 15 on consecutive days improved the situation. This was further strengthened with takes of 21, 26 and 26 after Christmas, giving a very satisfactory December total of 230. The year ended with 2,550 ducks caught, comprising 2,089 Mallard, 450 Teal and 11 Shoveler.

Apart from the relay experiments mentioned above, test releases were made in every month except May and June to investigate further the seasonal changes in the orientation of Mallard caught in the Decoy. Twenty-eight releases and 839 birds were involved.

The season 1966-67 is the tenth in which I have been in charge of the Decoy, so a detailed analysis of the catches, weighings, measurements and recoveries has been put in train. The 375 recoveries notified in 1966 will not be set out here, therefore, but an exception is made in one noteworthy case.

A juvenile male Mallard, ring number AJ 49884, caught in the Decoy and released nearby on 21st September 1962 was shot on 4th December 1965 at Raymond, Alberta (49.30 N, 112.41 W) well over to the west side of Canada. The very minimum distance from Borough Fen is 4,300 miles. This is the first recovery from North America of a British-ringed Mallard and right outside the normal migration pattern. It is a matter for conjecture whether the bird went westwards from Britain on its long journey, or by a series of abmigrations from flyway to flyway eastwards across the U.S.S.R. Although the bird was released on an orientation test, this was in heavy overcast conditions with an overall random scatter. The final bearing on which the bird was lost (213°) was therefore of little consequence.