

## Wildfowl Survey in south-west Asia : progress in 1966

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### Summary

In the spring of 1966 the Survey received a grant from the World Wildlife Fund which greatly stimulated its development. International liaison was promoted through visits to Tehran, Baghdad, Cairo, Kabul and Bombay, where preparations were laid for participation in the January 1967 International Wildfowl Census. The I.W.R.B. Warsaw Conference on co-ordination of wildfowl research was attended by the writer; the decision to set up an Asiatic Wildfowl Working Group was one of the results of the conference. Ringing efforts were intensified during the year with a start being made in three new areas, Iran, Iraq and Assam. There was, however, no significant improvement in the return of Russian rings from south-west Asia. Of special interest during the year was the discovery that the White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* moults its flight feathers in West Pakistan in November, and the discovery that the Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens* and Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* had been wrongly included in the fauna of India and Pakistan. There was also encouraging news of the White-winged Wood Duck *Cairina scutulata* from Assam.

### Introduction

Receipt of a welcome grant from the World Wildlife Fund permitted intensification of the survey as outlined previously in the 16th and 17th Annual Reports (Savage 1965, 1966) and the development of liaison with the International Wildfowl Research Bureau. The writer also had opportunities of making visits to Tehran, Baghdad and Cairo twice each, and also to Kabul and Bombay. Discussions were held with some of the leading naturalists in the countries concerned and plans were made for a vigorous co-operative effort on the International Wildfowl Census in January 1967.

Plans for 1967 include co-ordination of the mid-winter census, special enquiries into the status of the White-winged Wood Duck, participation in the Pakistan Wildlife Commission and if possible a regional conference on wildfowl in the winter before the 1968 census.

Progress and prospects in the region are best summarised country by country.

### Egypt

There is as yet no official protection of wildfowl in Egypt, but the Egyptian Government appreciate the value of their remaining wetlands as a tourist attraction and for this reason are considering saving a few of the remaining important areas from reclamation. There is, however, still extensive market trapping and a huge demand for wild duck—which sell for more than chicken at 65 PT (10/6d.) each.

A "festival of duck-shooting" was held in November-December, 1966, with prizes offered for rare species shot. This understandably aroused great indignation abroad and it was suggested by the writer that conservation of wildfowl and wetlands as currently practised by W.A.G.B.I.

and the Nature Conservancy in Britain might be more beneficial to the tourist trade and would certainly receive favourable publicity. There has so far been no comment.

A promising development has been the commencement of a three year research programme on the migration of birds in the Nile delta by an expedition of the Smithsonian Institution and under the leadership of Dr. G. E. Watson. It is not known yet to what extent the programme will include wildfowl, but such work is bound to stimulate thought in regard to rational conservation of wildlife and habitats in general.

### Iraq

On the retirement of Dr. Bashir Allouse, the directorship of the Iraq Natural History Museum passed to Professor Nuri Mahdi, who has taken a vigorous interest in the Wildfowl Survey and the International Wildfowl Census in particular. The ornithological work of the museum had also been expanded with the recruitment of P. V. George, lately a research associate of the Bombay Natural History Society. The museum is part of the University of Baghdad and is also supported by grants from the Gulbenkian Trust. It is thus well placed to carry out research into the wildfowl and wetlands of the Tigris and Euphrates marshes.

The game laws of Iraq are comprehensive, but enforcement is difficult in so large a country, much of which is difficult of access. At the same time shooting has been almost abolished for internal security reasons and numbers of duck and geese have increased by all accounts during the last eight years. Flocks of geese in one particular area occur today in tens of thousands yet no mention of these is made

in the ornithological records of the country. Species include Greylag *Anser anser* and Whitefront *Anser albifrons* mostly, but also Lesser Whitefront *Anser erythrophus* and up to four hundred Red-breasted Geese *Branta ruficollis*. The latter is of great interest as there has been only one other sighting (Vernon Robertson *in litt*) since the cautious remarks of Ticehurst (1922).

A reconnaissance survey of the Tigris and Euphrates marshes in summer by P. V. George showed that the Marbled Teal *Anas angustirostris* bred quite commonly in some areas, but there was no indication of any other breeding ducks or geese in the areas visited.

#### Iran

Wildfowl conservation is being sponsored by the Department of Game and Fisheries. One small reserve has already been purchased near Bandar Pahlavi in the south-west corner of the Caspian Sea and a second of nearly four thousand acres is being provided by H.R.H. Prince Abdur Reza near Sari in Mazanderan, also near the Caspian. These reserves are planned as sanctuaries as well as ringing stations.

It is sad to note that the goose flocks which used to winter near Farahabad in Mazanderan (Savage 1963) no longer do so except in very small parties on account of the disturbance caused by hunters in jeeps.

A survey of Lake Rezaiyeh made during the summer by Colonel Golasorkhi of the Game Department showed that the Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* was still nesting in similar numbers to those found in 1960 (Savage 1964) and in addition huge numbers of Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* appeared to be nesting on the mudflats at the south-east corner of the lake. The latter, however, were unapproachable nearer than about one mile due to the shallow water and soft mud. Breeding has not been confirmed.

In addition to the work of the Game Department useful observations have been made by Lindon Cornwallis, now curator of the Pahlavi University Zoological Museum, Shiraz.

#### Afghanistan

There is as yet no control of shooting except on Lake Kargah, which lies about ten miles west of Kabul. Lake Kargah, however, is a valuable refuge particularly for the large numbers of duck that use the extensive feeding grounds around Kabul. Market trapping and shooting over

decoys are still practised on a large scale, mostly during the period of the spring passage.

An interesting bird seen in the Kabul bazaar in March was a Marbled Teal *Anas angustirostris*. Although this is a common breeding bird along the Amu Darya in Uzbekhestan (Salikhbaev and Bogdanov 1961), and formerly in the Hamun-e Helmand in Baluchistan, it has not been previously recorded from central Afghanistan.

#### Pakistan

An expedition from the World Wildlife Fund, led by Guy Mountfort, visited Pakistan in October-November at the suggestion of the writer to investigate and advise on the problems of wildlife conservation. After three weeks in the field they prepared an outline report which was extremely well received by President Ayub Khan. As a result of this, a Wildlife Commission is being set up to review the whole position of wildlife in both East and West Pakistan, and especially the administration of the Game Laws. Several wildfowl refuge projects will be considered and the Wildfowl Survey has been asked to participate in the work of the Wildlife Commission.

An important discovery during the year was that the White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala* which congregate at Khabbaki Lake do so to moult their flight feathers. As a result of this discovery Khabbaki Lake is being made a permanent wildlife refuge in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund.

#### India

The private efforts of M. J. S. Mackenzie in Assam have again produced much valuable information. His records of the Chinese race of the Spotbill *Anas poecilorhyncha zonorhyncha* have been confirmed by the Bombay Natural History Society after examination of specimens. It should be noted, however, that there is still a marked difference from the Chinese Spotbills at Slimbridge (believed to be of Japanese origin). The possibility of a "cline" cannot be ruled out and only ringing and specimens from the Chinese side can solve the problem.

A number of sightings of the White-winged Wood Duck *Cairina scutulata* were recorded as the result of enquiries but the fact remains that the species only remains in India in very small numbers in limited localities. It is totally protected and rightly so. Two sightings have come

to light in East Pakistan, both around 1954 and near Pablakhali but the habitat concerned is now submerged under the new Kaptai Lake.

The Bombay Natural History Society has participated wholeheartedly in the Wildfowl Survey and so has the Delhi Birdwatching Society.

#### Ringling programme

One thousand four hundred and fifty-two ducks and geese were ringed in West Pakistan and India (Table I). In addition

about 50 ducks were ringed in Assam, including two Falcated Ducks, and a small number of Mallard in northern Iran. Efforts in Pakistan, Iran and Iraq are being intensified in 1967. As decided at the I.W.R.B. Warsaw conference, ringling efforts are to be concentrated in mid-winter.

The recovery rates for Asia are still less than five per cent and are almost entirely from the U.S.S.R. This indicates that there is room for a big improvement in the reporting of recoveries in southern Asia.

Table I. Wildfowl ringed in India and Pakistan in 1966.

Species	India (B.N.H.S./W.H.O.)	Pakistan (Game Dept.)	Total
Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	293	19	312
Common Teal <i>A. crecca</i>	564	109	673
Indian Spotbill <i>A. peocilorhyncha</i>	43	—	43
Mallard <i>A. platyrhynchos</i>	—	28	28
Gadwall <i>A. strepera</i>	—	4	4
Wigeon <i>A. penelope</i>	9	—	9
Garganey <i>A. querquedula</i>	209	7	216
Shoveler <i>A. clypeata</i>	67	26	93
Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>	—	2	2
Common Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	1	6	7
Ferruginous Duck <i>A. nyroca</i>	3	7	10
Tufted Duck <i>A. fuligula</i>	3	—	3
White-headed Duck <i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>	—	10	10
Ruddy Shelduck <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	—	2	2
Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>	—	2	2
Bar-headed Goose <i>A. indicus</i>	—	8	8
Comb Duck or Nukhta <i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>	20	—	20
Cotton Teal <i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>	10	—	10
		Total	1452

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