

## Abberton Ringing Station, 1968

The reservoir had a significant addition to its wildfowl population with the arrival of 63 White-fronted Geese on 1st February. Attracted by the large acreage of winter wheat west of the Top Section, they fed there most days until their departure in the second week of March, fighting out to roost at night on the coast in the Bradwell area.

Frequently up to 30 Bewick's Swans grazed with the Whitefronts, often being in view from the public roadway and attracting much attention from bird watchers and also the public in general. Certainly they were a great asset to the Reservoir in its Bird Sanctuary role.

We were naturally delighted when 19 White-fronted Geese arrived again in December, but although they eventually built up to 35 in number they were much more free-ranging than in the previous winter. This was because of the acute shortage of available winter wheat due to the extremely unsuitable autumn conditions for cultivating and sowing cereals. Nevertheless, geese had returned for two winters, although in small numbers, an unusual phenomenon for this part of Essex. An exciting prospect presents itself of Abberton becoming a regular goose place.

Early in the year we took 46 Wigeon. The spring produced two pairs of Garganey. Several Shoveler were ringed, both passage and breeding birds, and later we marked 11 of their ducklings from three different broods. We also got a lead of Shelducks, mostly immature non-breeders. Being protected and inedible they produce a low recovery rate.

During the year several good runs of catches were obtained with Tufted Ducks. These will often readily come in to those already ringed and left in the traps; the large deep water trap on the Top Section was particularly successful in this respect. A Smew trapped in a circular American type diving duck trap had the distinction of being the first male of the species to be ringed in England.

During the summer a large number of Mallard passed through the eclipse stage on the Top and Middle reservoirs, hiding in the dense marginal vegetation. They trapped fairly easily, and information on the length of flightless period, weights and subsequent wing growth rates was obtained from over 150 ducks.

A considerable drop in the water level during the summer, exposing the Island and marginal mud flats, is needed at

Abberton Reservoir to attract and hold large numbers of migratory ducks and to allow them to be caught throughout the autumn and winter. This failed to happen in 1968. Heavy summer rains, with 6 inches of rainfall on one day early in September as a climax, resulted in heavy flooding and an abnormal intake of water from the River Stour. Consequently the catching suffered; 1,981 ducks were ringed, most of which involved very hard work in unpleasant conditions.

A large influx of ducks occurred in early September, with probably a maximum of 6-7,000 during the first two weeks. The dabblers were quick to find and take advantage of the large acreage of sodden cereal stubbles adjoining the reservoir, and fed heavily on these until the spilt grain was exhausted or the fields were again cultivated. With the loss of this food supply there was no alternative available at the reservoir. The water level was rising fast and the few shallows disappearing, so most of the ducks quickly dispersed on to the vast flooded areas throughout SE. England with their huge food supplies. This resulted in the smallest Abberton October Wildfowl Count ever. Reports came to us of more Teal than normal on coastal and inland marshes. This was certainly not true of Abberton. Teal made up a much larger proportion of the catch in the past but, as in recent years, this was again not so, the number ringed not reaching 500.

Apart from the wildfowl, 3,209 other birds were ringed during the year. Perhaps most remarkable was the ringed of 724 Yellow Wagtails, a figure far in excess of any other yearly total. They produce many recaptures, the same birds being caught year after year. Recoveries are less easily come by; indeed after ringing over 8,000, we have only just had our first report from abroad, in Senegal. Eight Kingfishers were mist-netted throughout the autumn and winter, all juveniles excepting one, and no retraps were made. As never more than two Kingfishers were seen, there is some suggestion of movement. A Slavonian Grebe, a bird little ringed, was almost the first in a new trap experimentally sited in deep water. Ten Little Grebes were also ringed.

A large amount of maintenance was carried out during the spring and summer months. All of the traps had to be inspected and where necessary repaired and rewired. The portable traps need to be in excellent condition as they are sub-

ject to a great deal of pulling back and forth through reeds and deep mud in constant pursuit of a variable water level, particularly on the Island when it appears. Carrying out emergency repairs during unfavourable winter conditions is not a job sought after.

The very large deep water trap on the Top Section had to be completely rebuilt, a formidable task. Readily available willow poles were used for this purpose and little carpentry was involved, but we used a great deal of wire netting. The existing trap, in spite of its poor condition, was catching Mallard well, and it is satisfying to note that the three weeks of repair work was carried out so that only two days catching were lost. With a view to increased diving duck catching, an additional deep water trap was constructed amongst willows below the weir on the Middle Section. Again natural willow poles were used, and, being an experimental site, old wire netting was utilised for covering. By the end of the year some Tufted Ducks had been caught, but unfortunately the numbers of diving ducks feeding in the area in previous winters had not materialised.

The yearly task of overhauling and painting the 18 ft. clinker built motor launch 'Gadwall' was accomplished and she was relaunched with usual ceremony in June. The dinghy also had to be painted and other equipment for trapping on the Island had to be maintained in spite of not being used. This also applied

to the ringing and storage hut on the Main Section.

The maintenance programme coupled with continuous operating of duck traps and intensive small bird trapping, keeps me busy between duck catching seasons, and the popular conception of most of the locals that my summer is spent in quiet contemplative relaxation is not strictly accurate.

1968 was irrevocably marred by the sudden death of General Wainwright. I was privileged to serve as his assistant for nearly 13 years. Lady Craven has given us the use of the General's study, and of the boats and caravan, and is helpful in many other ways. Mrs. Ireland continues as loyal and efficient a secretary as ever.

Mr. Fred Trust, Assistant Chief Officer of the London Fire Brigade and formerly of the Romford Ringing Station, joined the team in June. An expert mist-netter, he motors down from London whenever his duties allow. His skilful netting soon produced exciting results, and since October he has taken over complete responsibility for the small bird aspect of the work at Abberton. Permission was obtained for him to site a cedar hut close to the caravan. This was essential to prevent confusion and some rather odd records. A Sedge Warbler recorded with a wing measurement of 273 mm. and a weight of 1,120 gm. was treated as mighty suspect and more likely to be a Mallard!

R. KING

## Borough Fen Decoy, 1968

January was an open month with the decoy pond frozen for only four days from the 10th to the 15th. As in the previous January, the proportion of duck dogged into the pipe (32%) was higher than the general winter level, perhaps indicating an influx of naive birds. Deeping Lake trap was operated throughout the month; besides the duck, 80 rails were ringed. During the period 10th to 17th about 850 surface feeding ducks were roosting on Deeping Lake, but the majority of the diving duck left. Unfortunately the area of open water was not near the trap, and the waterfowl did not seem prepared to make a big trek over the ice.

The birds in the Decoy ignored the dog almost completely in February. Plenty of frozen potatoes were made available but grain appeared to have a

greater attraction. Once the duck were in the pipe feeding, however, they would stay and dabble amongst the potatoes. Catches in the Deeping Lake trap were disappointing considering the numbers there.

The season ended in March with a total of 3,695. Early migrants at Deeping were Sand Martins on the 25th, and Chiffchaff 27th. They preceded the first Lepidoptera, Tortoiseshell and Brimstone butterflies on the 28th. The first passerine nest found with eggs was a Dunnock with two on the 21st, followed by a Song Thrush with one egg on the 23rd. Twelve nests had been found by the end of the month including three Mallard.

Maintenance commenced in April with a biting easterly wind and squalls of sleet and snow. The approach roadway was repaired with broken limestone. Fifty