

THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF THE SLIMBRIDGE COLLECTION

by Peter Scott

A COMPLETE collection of the Anatidae would consist of at least one pair of each of the 247 different kinds known to science. No such collection of living birds has ever been assembled, or probably ever will be. Nevertheless, most ambitious collectors hope to make their collections as complete as possible. And yet such a collection would scarcely be worth the effort required to bring it together if it did no more than satisfy the magpie instincts of the collector himself. A collection of living waterfowl, however, has much more to offer, for it has a contribution to make in the fields of science, of education, of conservation, and perhaps in the wider field of recreation in which things of beauty are to be enjoyed by man. That a comparative collection such as the one at Slimbridge offers opportunity for important research in behaviour and the study of evolution, as well as for education and recreation, has been amply demonstrated during the past ten years.

At present the collection at Slimbridge consists of some 1300 birds of 147 different forms. It is the most representative collection in the world, and probably the most representative that there has ever been. Of the great collections of the past, the finest was undoubtedly that of Mr Jean Delacour at Clères in Normandy in the period between the wars. Other famous collections were those of Lord Derby at Knowsley, Lord Lilford at Lilford, Mr St. Quentin at Scampston, the Duke of Bedford at Woburn, Mr Blaauw at Gooilust in Holland, the brothers Stevens at Walcot, Mr Ezra at Foxwarren, Mr Spedan Lewis at Leckford, Sir Philip Sassoon at Trent Park, Dr Derscheid at Sterrebeck in Belgium, and of course in many zoos.

Almost all these fine collections have been sadly ephemeral. They have mostly depended on the enthusiasm of a single person and have disappeared with the passing, or with the changing interest, of the enthusiast. Collections on the scale which existed in the past have become too expensive to be maintained by private individuals and, at least in Europe, they are now only practicable for some kind of society or institution. To be sure, there are a great many small and very delightful private collections in Britain—more than 200 of them—and in the U.S. there are some rather larger ones. But the really representative collections are to be seen in the zoos (some of them better than at any time in the

past), at Clères in Normandy which is open to the public, at Peakirk and at Slimbridge. Only at Slimbridge are more than a hundred kinds represented. Let us hope that the framework of the Wildfowl Trust will be sturdy enough to survive through many generations in a changing world.

Slimbridge, in its present form, owes its origin to the quite small collection which I maintained at my lighthouse on the Wash before the Second World War. The birds were dispersed when the war began, and only a handful still survived at the end of it. But I was determined to begin again. The lighthouse offered little chance of expansion and lacked fresh water, and from 1946 onwards the decision to start afresh on the Severn Estuary began to crystallise.

Some of the birds which had been at the lighthouse had spent the war in Scotland at the home of my friend Gavin Maxwell, and he had also collected quite a number of other geese. In the autumn of 1946 these birds were moved to Slimbridge as the nucleus of the new community. They consisted of 50 geese of 18 different kinds.

From this small beginning the great collection was gradually built up. Table I shows how it has grown.

When the first birds arrived, only the Rushy Pen and the Orchard were fenced, and even these had not been completed. The 50 geese were released for the first night into the rooms of the uninhabited bungalow, and driven round in flocks into the pens on the following morning. The following year the Decoyside Pens were constructed, and it was not until 1948 that the Big Pen, which at that time included the North and South American Pens and the present Tower Pen, was added to bring the Trust's enclosure to about 21 acres. In the winter of 1949-50 the Big Pen was divided into a series of large pens and a row of small ones, and in the following year a path was laid along the bank dividing them. Then in 1954 the Rushy Pen was enlarged, and a new pond was dug, beside which the old barn was rebuilt with a higher roof and a new house was built in which I now live and work.

A new pond was dug in the Big Pen in 1955, making the path into a causeway at one point, and finally, in 1957, an additional area of 6 or 7 acres (the exact amount has not yet been determined) was made available to the Trust, and this is now being developed in the light of our experience of laying out the enclosures in the past. It is likely to become the most beautiful part of the Trust's enclosures and includes a large number of new ponds, some of them more than 15 feet deep, an artificial hill and a range of covered aviaries for the more delicate species.

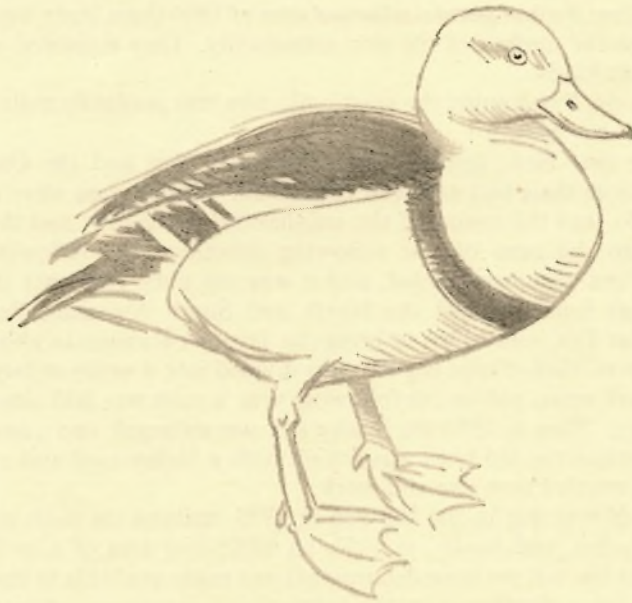
The Trust has been most fortunate in its Curators, who have been, without exception, extremely conscientious people. In the earliest days the birds were in the charge of John Yealland and Miss Eunice Overend. In 1950 Tommy Johnstone, who had been joint Curator, took full charge when Mr Yealland became Curator of Birds at the London Zoo.

The overall figures for rearing success shown in Tables I and II reflect a tremendous advance in the technique of rearing waterfowl under bantam foster-parents. The quipment and methods now used represent a process of evolution in design and detail at all stages from the nest boxes and baskets to the electrically heated brooders.

It seems that the Trust has been the first to breed only two species—the Cape Shoveler and the Bewick's Swan—but there is a satisfactory number of first records for Europe, and several species appear only to have been bred once

previously. In addition, the trust has built up successful breeding stocks of a number of species which, although they had been bred occasionally, were not well established in captivity. These include the Cuban and Wandering Whistling Ducks, Orinoco Goose, Cinnamon Teal, Marbled Teal, Red Shoveler and Ringed Teal.

Table III shows the rare species which have laid eggs, and Table IV shows the number of species and subspecies which are currently to be seen in the Wildfowl Trust's Collection and nowhere else in this country.



The First Ten Years of the Slimbridge Collection

TABLE I

Numbers in the Collection

		Birds (50 geese of 18 spp. in autumn 1946)	Forms and Spp. 'over 70'
1948	440	
1949	650	106
1950	700	119
1951	920	130
1952	996	136
1953	1050	136
1954	1100	135
1955	1100	134
1956	1200	139
1957	1301	147

TABLE II

Breeding

	Forms Laying	Forms Reared	Goslings and Cygnets	Ducklings	Total Reared
1947 ..	10	14 (incl. eggs from elsewhere)	18	31	49
1948 ..	27	17	—	—	147
1949 ..	45	37	41	269	310
1950 ..	—	39	61	221	282
1951 ..	51	44	72	338	410
1952 ..	74	59	111	350	461
1953 ..	70	51	137	248	385
1954 ..	73	46	125	144	269
1955 ..	75	57	144	270	414
1956 ..	86	67	176	326	502
1957 ..	91	72	178	562	740

TABLE III

The following species, which have rarely or never before bred
in captivity, have nested in the Trust's grounds

	Previous Breeding Records	
	World	Europe
Magpie Goose	1	0
Southern Red-billed Whistling Duck	—	0
Bewick's Swan	0	—
Coscoroba Swan	1	—
Ne-ne or Hawaiian Goose	—	0 (in recent years)
Hawaiian Duck	—	0
Philippine Duck	1	0
Cape Shoveler	0	0
New Zealand Scaup	—	0
Ring-necked Duck	—	0
Southern Pochard	—	0
Comb Duck	1	1
Goosander	?	?
Smew	1	1
Ruddy Duck	—	1

TABLE IV

The Wildfowl Trust is the only place in Great Britain where we believe the following
species and subspecies are on show

Spotted Whistling Duck	Blue-winged Teal
Northern Red-billed Whistling Duck	Cape or South African Shelduck
Trumpeter Swan	New Zealand Blue or Mountain Duck
Pacific Black Brant	Baer's Pochard
Moluccan Radjah Shelduck	Lesser Scaup
Falkland Flightless Steamer Duck	Hartlaub's Duck
Bronze-winged Duck	White-winged Wood Duck
Hottentot Teal	King Eider
American Green-winged Teal	Common Scoter
New Zealand Brown Duck	American Goldeneye
Hawaiian Duck	Bufflehead
Florida Duck	Smew
North American Black Duck	Hooded Merganser
Chinese Spotbill	Red-breasted Merganser
New Zealand Grey Duck	Goosander
Abyssinian Yellowbill	Maccoa Duck