

Wildfowl Counts in the U.K.

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Roughly one and a half million of the wildfowl that breed in the arctic and sub-arctic winter in the United Kingdom. In order to monitor their status and welfare, identify the major resorts and help effective and realistic conservation measures to be enacted, The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust organises the National Wildfowl Counts. Financial assistance is received from the Nature Conservancy Council and (since 1988) the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland. All the swans, geese and ducks are covered, along with Great Crested *Podiceps cristatus* and Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* and Coot *Fulica atra*, each month from September to March by some two thousand volunteers. Because geese feed by day, often far from their wetland roosts, supplementary censuses of several species are held regularly, combining morning and evening flight counts with field surveys. On a national scale these presently cover Pink-footed *Anser brachyrhynchos*, Greenland White-fronted *A. albifrons flavirostris* (by the GWG Study) and Greylag Geese *A. anser* in November and April, and Dark-bellied Brent Geese *Branta bernicla bernicla* in January and February.

1987-88 was the 41st season of the counts. A total of 179 sites was counted, representing all types of coastal and inland wetland habitat. The winter was the mildest for several years, and the counts were also affected by the extremely wet and windy autumn. Table 1 shows the highest monthly counts for each species in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the month in which these peaks occurred. (Note that these figures probably underestimate the actual numbers present in the country, substantially so for some species, because the counts are not completely comprehensive, and there is also a movement of birds through the country during the course of the



season.)

As usual the largest numbers of Great Crested Grebes were on Loughs Neagh and Beg, N. Ireland, where 1400 were found in September. There was also a marked influx into coastal areas in February, when nearly a quarter of those counted were on estuaries.

There are signs that the Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* population is already increasing, following the banning of the use of most sizes of lead weights in January 1987. The national index of abundance was at its highest level for many years in 1987-88. The Lough Neagh basin was also the main area for this species, with 1300 in September. The breeding season is the best time to estimate the total number of Mute Swans in the country, and a national survey is to be organised by The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust with BTO help in 1990.

The migrant swans fared contrastingly. Bewick's Swans *C. columbianus bewickii* were at their lowest level for several years, many birds presumably staying on the Continent in such a mild winter. The Ouse Washes (Cambs/Norfolk) held 3800 at peak, the nearby Nene Washes 1400 and the Martin Mere/Ribble Estuary area (Lancs) 550, a record. Whooper Swans *C. cygnus*, of which the Icelandic breeding population winters almost entirely in Britain and Ireland, were unusually numerous. Three sites in Northern Ireland held the largest concentrations: Lough Foyle (1300), Loughs Neagh/Beg (1100) and Upper Lough Erne (670).

A record 420 Bean Geese *A. fabalis* were found in the main U.K. area, the Yare Valley (Norfolk). Following a highly successful breeding season in Iceland and Greenland, with 25.6% young in the autumn flocks, Pink-footed Geese increased to 172,000 according to the November census. In that month a remarkable 35,000 were concentrated at Montrose Basin

Table 1. Maximum total counts of wildfowl from September 1987 to March 1988.

	Great Britain		N.Ireland	
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	6800	(Sep)	2100	(Oct)
Little Grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	730	(Sep/Oct)	260	(Jan)
Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	8200	(Jan)	950	(Oct)
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>	10200	(Nov)	1900	(Sep)
Bewick's Swan <i>C. columbianus bewickii</i>	5000	(Jan)	340	(Dec)
Whooper Swan <i>C. cygnus</i>	3100	(Dec)	2200	(Feb/Mar)
Bean Goose <i>Anser fabalis</i>	420	(Feb)	0	
Pink-footed Goose <i>A. brachyrhynchus</i>	172000	(Nov)	3	(Oct)
Eur. White-fronted Goose <i>A. a. albifrons</i>	7500	(Jan)	0	
Gd. White-fronted Goose <i>A. a. flavirostris</i>	12400	(Nov)	300	(Dec)
Greylag Goose <i>A. anser</i> (incl. feral)	108000	(Nov)	850	(Mar)
Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis</i>	32600	(Sep)	210	(Feb)
Barnacle Goose <i>B. leucopsis</i> : Greenland pop.	27000	(Mar/Apr)	50	(Feb)
Svalbard pop.	11400	(Nov)		
Dark-bellied Brent Goose <i>B. b. bernicla</i>	91400	(Jan)	0	
Light-bellied Brent Goose <i>B. b. hrota</i>	2000	(Nov/Dec)	16900	(Oct)
Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	64200	(Feb)	2900	(Feb)
Mandarin Aix <i>galericulata</i>	160	(Dec)	0	
Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	234100	(Dec)	16000	(Oct)
Gadwall <i>A. strepera</i>	6100	(Dec)	200	(Dec)
Teal <i>A. crecca</i>	90100	(Dec)	5600	(Dec)
Mallard <i>A. platyrhynchos</i>	192100	(Dec)	9400	(Dec)
Pintail <i>A. acuta</i>	28400	(Dec)	210	(Dec)
Garganey <i>A. querquedula</i>	17	(Sep)	0	
Shoveler <i>A. clypeata</i>	7300	(Oct)	250	(Nov)
Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	32400	(Dec)	25000	(Jan)
Tufted Duck <i>A. fuligula</i>	45100	(Jan)	21000	(Jan)
Scaup <i>A. marila</i>	5600	(Jan)	1400	(Nov)
Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	18300	(Sep)	370	(Feb)
Long-tailed Duck <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	5500	(Feb)	28	(Dec)
Common Scoter <i>Melanitta nigra</i>	3900	(Feb)	2700	(Jan)
Velvet Scoter <i>M. fusca</i>	1700	(Feb)	3	(Jan)
Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	12200	(Feb)	12000	(Feb)
Smew <i>Mergus albellus</i>	94	(Jan)	2	(Dec-Feb)
Red-breasted Merganser <i>M. serrator</i>	3900	(Jan)	650	(Feb)
Goosander <i>M. merganser</i>	4000	(Jan)	7	(Jan)
Ruddy Duck <i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	2300	(Jan)	25	(Jan)
Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	86300	(Dec)	6600	(Sep)

(Tayside). European White-fronted Geese *A. albifrons albifrons* were surprisingly plentiful for a mild winter, with 4600 at Slimbridge (Glos) and 1400 on the Swale (Kent) in January. The Greenland White-fronted Goose Study, together with the Irish Wildlife Service, found a total of 25,000 of that subspecies in Britain and Ireland in the spring, representing the entire world population. There were 8800 in Wexford in the Irish Republic, while Islay held a peak of 7900 in February. Like the Pinkfeet, the Greylag Geese in Iceland had a good breeding season in 1987 (33% juveniles in autumn), but the November census total was only 105,000, compared to 108,000 in 1986. This suggests considerable

undercounting, perhaps due in part to birds staying longer in Iceland. Three areas in northern Scotland held over 10,000 in autumn: the Dinnet Lochs (Grampian), Loch of Skene (Grampian) and Beaully Firth (Highland). Recent studies of the native Greylag breeding population in the Western Isles and of the increasing feral stock, spread throughout the country, have estimated their sizes at 2000 and 14,000 respectively. The feral Canada Goose *B. canadensis* population is also continuing to increase, and, bearing in mind under-recording, is probably approaching 50,000.

A complete census of the wintering grounds of the Greenland breeding population of Barnacle Geese *B. leucopsis* was

held in March/April 1988. A total of 34,600 was located (27,000 in Scotland and 7600 in Ireland), compared to 33,800 in 1978 and 25,300 in 1983. Islay held 20,400, following a seasonal peak of 21,900 in November, of which 12.3–12.8% were juveniles. The Svalbard breeding population, wintering on the upper Solway Firth, contained 15.1% young. Dark-bellied Brent Geese had their second successive breeding failure in Siberia, but the numbers reaching Britain were almost as high as in the previous record winter. The Wash (Norfolk/Lincs) held 23,200 in February and Foulness/Leigh (Essex) 18,600 in October. A census of the Irish wintering grounds of the Canada/Greenland light-bellied Brents in October revealed 20,700 birds, including 15,000 at Strangford Lough (Co. Down). The proportion of young was 15.2%. The Lindisfarne (Northumberland) flock, from Svalbard, reached 2000 compared with a usual 3000.

The February peak of Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (Table 1) probably included several thousand winter visitors in addition to native birds. In that month a record 6000 were present on the Ribble Estuary. The main site, the Wash, held 16,300 in January. Over 200,000 Wigeon *Anas penelope* were counted in both December and January. In the former month there were 35,000 on the Ribble Estuary (also a record) and in the latter 38,700 on the Ouse Washes. The numbers of Gadwall *A. strepera* continue to increase. The autumn gathering on Rutland Water (Leics) reached 1400 in September. As usual, the Mersey Estuary (Cheshire/Merseyside) held the most Teal *A. crecca*, with 12,700 in December – 14% of the total British count. The principal area for Mallard *A. platyrhynchos* is on the opposite coast, in the Humber, where there were 10,000 in December. The national population index for Mallard in that month is showing signs of increase, whereas the numbers in September, comprising mainly native breeding stock, have been remarkably constant for some thirty years. In November, the adjacent Mersey and Dee Estuaries carried a total of 17,600 Pintail *A. acuta* – two-thirds of the British peak. The regular February concentration on the Wash amounted to 7700, its highest ever. A count of 1400 Shoveler *A. clypeata* on the Ouse Washes in March was the largest made anywhere in the U.K. for many years,

water levels there being ideal for dabbling ducks at the time.

As usual, by far the largest gatherings of diving ducks were on Loughs Neagh and Beg, which in January held a staggering 24,000 Pochard *Aythya ferina*, 19,600 Tufted Ducks *A. fuligula* and 10,500 Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*. The peak month for Scaup *A. marila* there was November, when 1400 were counted. Elsewhere the main areas for Pochard were the Mainland lochs of Orkney, with 4900 in October, and the gravel pit complexes of the Cotswold Water Park (Glos/Wilts), 4100 in December. Tufted Ducks were at their highest level on record in December, probably due partly to the mildness of the winter, obviating the need for birds to move south out of Britain. Scaup reached a remarkable 4000 at Carse Bay on the north shore of the Solway Firth in February, signalling a recovery after years of decline in Scotland.

The regular RSPB/Britoil surveys of the

Table 2. Sites with an average peak total of 20000 or more wildfowl over the five seasons 1983–84 to 1987–88. (The peak total is the sum of the season's maxima for each individual species, regardless of month.)

	Average peak total
Lough Neagh/Beg *	59900
The Wash *	58400
Ouse Washes *	55400
Ribble Estuary	44100
Loch of Strathbeg *	35900
Mersey Estuary	33700
Upper Solway Firth (*)	33500
Thames Estuary	31600
Lindisfarne *	31300
Morecambe Bay	30800
Abberton Reservoir *	29300
North Norfolk Coast *	28000
Severn Estuary (*)	26300
Montrose Basin	25800
Lough Foyle	25700
Strangford Lough	25300
Dee Estuary *	24100
Loch Leven *	23800
The Swale *	22900
Firth of Forth	22300
Dornoch Firth	22200
Cromarty Firth	21500
Rutland Water	21400
The Humber	21000

* = Ramsar site; (*) Ramsar site in part.

Moray Firth found big reductions in the numbers of sea ducks, with no more than 2200 Eiders *Somateria mollissima*, 3900 Long-tailed Ducks *Clangula hyemalis* and 1500 scoters. Dundrum Bay (Co. Down) held 2700 Common Scoters *Melanitta nigra* in January.

Despite the mildness of the winter, nearly 100 Smew *Mergus albellus* reached Britain, including 27 at Wraysbury Gravel Pits (Berks) in early January and 20 at Dungeness (Kent) in mid-December. The huge annual gathering of saw-bills in the Beaulieu Firth (Highland) contained maxima of 1400 Mergansers *M. serrator* and 1900 Goosanders *M. merganser* in mid-winter. In November, 1100 Goosanders were reported off Tentsmuir (Fife). The main breeding area for Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis* is still the west Midlands, and 910 stayed to winter at Blithfield Reservoir

(Staffs). Chew Valley Lake (Avon), the chief wintering site in recent years, showed a decrease to 610. Coot exceeded 10,000 at Abberton Reservoir (Essex) in October.

Table 2 lists sites where an average total of at least 20,000 wildfowl was found over the five seasons 1983–84 to 1987–88. In addition to individual species criteria, any locality regularly holding a total of 20,000 or more waterfowl qualifies as of International Importance, and is therefore eligible for listing by the U.K. Government under the Ramsar Convention. Sites marked with an asterisk in the table have already been listed.

These results are given in much greater detail in the booklet "*Wildfowl and Wader Counts 1987–88*", obtainable from Slimbridge, which also includes the results of the British Trust for Ornithology's Birds of Estuaries Enquiry.

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