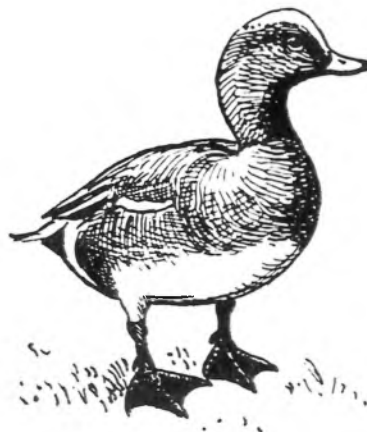


Wildfowl Counts in the U.K., 1988-89

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The National Wildfowl Counts are organised by The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust to monitor the numbers, distribution and trends of swans, geese, ducks, grebes, Cormorant and Coot in the United Kingdom. Counts are undertaken by volunteer ornithologists every month from September to March. Additional surveys regularly cover age ratios, roosting and feeding geese and breeding and moulting populations. Financial support is provided by the Nature Conservancy Council and the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland.

1988-89, the 42nd season of the counts, was an exceptionally mild winter. A total of 1854 sites was counted, with good coverage in all areas except northwest Scotland, Herefordshire and inland parts of Essex, Suffolk and some Northern Irish counties. Table 1 shows the highest counts for all species in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with the months in which these peaks occurred. The totals give a good idea of the actual populations of most species, but are less reliable for the grebes, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Mallard and Coot, which are particularly widespread. The sea ducks, which are very hard to survey, are omitted from the Table but discussed below.

The largest flocks of grebes are on Loughs Neagh and Beg, N. Ireland, which held peak totals of 410 Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and 1600 Great Crested Grebes *Podiceps cristatus* in 1988-89. Belfast Lough (Down/Antrim), Rutland Water (Leics) and Chew Valley Lake (Avon) also held over 500 Great Crested Grebes. Over 10,000 Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* were counted, nearly half of them on freshwater habitats (although many remain unrecorded on open coasts). Morecambe Bay (Lancs/Cumbria) held 730 Cormorants, the inner Moray Firth (Highland) 640 and Poole Harbour (Dorset) 620.

A huge gathering of 660 Mute Swans *Cygnus olor* at the Loch of Harray, Orkney, was surpassed only by a total of 1100 in Loughs Neagh

and Beg. The mildness of the 1988-89 winter meant that relatively few Bewick's Swans *C. columbianus bewickii* crossed the North Sea to winter in Britain. The Ouse Washes (Norfolk/Cambs) held 3800, the Nene Washes (Cambs) 1100, Breydon Water (Norfolk) 700 and the Martin Mere/Ribble Estuary (Lancs) area 640. Whooper Swans *C. cygnus* from Iceland were present in particularly large numbers in the autumn, with 2000 at Lough Foyle (Londonderry), 1200 at Loughs Neagh and Beg, and 1000 at the Loch of Harray.

Bean Geese *Anser fabalis* in the Yare Valley (Norfolk) totalled 370 in early January, this being the only substantial flock reported. Pinkfooted Geese *A. brachyrhynchus* reached a record 176,000 in the November Grey Goose Census, compared with 172,000 in 1987. With 24% juveniles in the autumn flocks a larger increase might have been expected. The degree of under-counting has obviously increased as the population has grown, a problem being urgently addressed. An astonishing 40,000 Pinkfeet roosted on the small Westwater Reservoir (Borders) in October, and 39,000 on Dupplin Loch (Tayside) in September. The main wintering area was the southwest Lancashire Mosslands, including Martin Mere, with 30,500 in December. The spring Grey Goose Census found 114,000 Pinkfeet in early April, including 61,000 in Grampian Region.

The European White-fronted Geese *A. a. albifrons* at Slimbridge (Glos), peaking at 3800, included 45% young. Not surprisingly, therefore, the British population index for that species was the highest for 16 years. Over 2000 reached the Swale (Kent). The Greenland White-fronted Goose Study, together with the Irish Wildlife Service, found totals of 26,000 Greenland Whitefronts *A. a. flavirostris* in November and 24,500 in spring, with peaks of 10,500 in Wexford (Irish Republic) and 7600 on Islay (Strathclyde). Greylag Geese *A. anser*, like Pinkfeet, had a good breeding season in Iceland

(23% juveniles in autumn), but showed only a slight increase in the November Grey Goose Census, to a record 109,000. Fox *et al.* (1989) estimated this population to have actually reached 130,000 by 1987-88. Roughly 20,000 feral Greylags are also probably now present in the U.K., along with 2000 native birds resident in northwest Scotland.

Flocks of over 1000 Canada Geese *Branta canadensis* were found at four places in England. This feral population continues to increase steadily, most markedly in southern England. Barnacle Geese *B. leucopsis* numbered 20,800 on Islay, where the bulk of the Greenland breeding population winters. The Svalbard stock, wintering at Caerlaverock (Dumfries & Galloway), was at an unprecedented 12,100. Another goose found in record numbers by the counts was the Dark-bellied Brent *B. b. bernicla*, whose autumn flocks contained 35% young. As usual, the largest numbers were on the Wash (Norfolk/Lincs), with 27,600 in December. The autumn gathering at Foulness/Leigh (Essex) reached 17,000. Light-bellied Brent Geese *B. b. hrota* have three major U.K. resorts: Strangford Lough (Co. Down), which held 8500 in October 1988 (the lowest peak there for seven years); Lough Foyle (3700 a month later) and Lindisfarne (Northumberland), which receives birds from the Svalbard breeding population (3000, November/December).

The Wash held 15,600 Shelducks *Tadorna tadorna* in January, whilst the largest concentration in Northern Ireland was at Strangford Lough, with a record 4000. The autumn count of Wigeon *Anas penelope* in Britain far exceeded its highest level during the last 30 years. The Ribble Estuary held 41,800 in November, Lindisfarne (Northumberland) 28,000 in October and the Dornoch Firth (Highland) 10,300 in October. In Northern Ireland, the 22,000 Wigeon found at Lough Foyle in October represented the bulk of the total count for the Province. Mid-winter Wigeon numbers were quite low in most areas, as befits such a mild winter, but Martin Mere carried 18,000 in February and the Ouse Washes 31,000 by March. Gadwall *A. strepera* increased yet again, with a remarkable 1800 present at Rutland Water (Leics) in October and 780 at Abberton Reservoir (Essex) in December. The pattern of increase in Britain has reflected the overall trend for Gadwall in northwest Europe, except that in cold winters there is a net reduction in northwest Europe (Monval & Pirot 1989). Teal *A. crecca* stay in Britain in larger numbers in mild winters, and the 1988-89 level was the highest for five years. In December

the adjacent Dee, Mersey and Ribble Estuaries, along with the nearby freshwater resorts at Woolston Eyes (Cheshire) and Martin Mere, held a total of 24,000 Teal. The Lough Neagh/Beg basin was the only U.K. site with over 5000 Mallard, recording 5600 in September. Half of the 70,000 Pintail *A. acuta* found in northwest Europe in January are on only 13 sites (Monval & Pirot 1989). Four of these are in England: the Mersey and Dee Estuaries, the Wash and Morecambe Bay. The Dee Estuary held 4800 Pintail in January 1989. Over 500 Shoveler *A. clypeata* were found at three places: Rutland Water (730), Loch Leven, Tayside (540) and the Ouse Washes (520).

Peak numbers of diving ducks at Loughs Neagh and Beg were at an even higher level than in 1987-88, with 39,800 Pochard *Aythya ferina*, 16,600 Tufted Ducks *A. fuligula*, 2200 Scaup *A. marila* and 12,200 Goldeneyes *Bucephala clangula*. This Pochard count represented 11% of the estimated northwest European population, which has actually declined overall (Monval & Pirot 1989). Tufted Ducks, like Teal, are present in the U.K. in larger number in mild winters than cold ones, and the total count for Great Britain exceeded 50,000 for the first time in 1988-89. The largest records there were at Rutland Water (5600), Abberton Reservoir (4000) and Loch Leven (3200). The biggest gathering of Scaup was again in Carse Bay on the Solway Firth (Dumfries & Galloway), with 3900 in December.

There were no reports from the main Eider *Somateria mollissima* area, the outer Firth of Tay, but records of over 2000 came from four sites: Morecambe Bay (5600); the inner Firth of Clyde (Strathclyde) (4400); Lindisfarne (2300) and Montrose Basin (Tayside) (2000). Long-tailed Ducks *Clangula hyemalis* numbered 10,500 in the Moray Firth (RSPB/BP) and 1000 in the Firth of Forth. Unusually, Long-tailed Ducks were widespread inland in southern Britain after the northerly gales in autumn. Nearly 3000 scoters were found in the Moray Firth by the RSPB/BP surveys, compared to an average of 10,000 in the early 1980s. The largest numbers of Common Scoters *Melanitta nigra* reported were in Dundrum Bay (Co Down), with 2600, and the Firth of Forth (2100), and of Velvet Scoters *M. fusca* in St Andrews Bay (Fife) (500). Away from Loughs Neagh and Beg the biggest gatherings of Goldeneyes were in the Firth of Forth (1600) and Abberton Reservoir (a record 1000).

The regular flock of Smew *Mergus albellus* at Dungeness (Kent) amounted to 15. The more numerous saw-bills, the Red-breasted Mergan-

ser *M. serrator* and Goosander *M. merganser*, reached 1100 and 1500 respectively in their main resort, the Beaulieu Firth (Highland). There were also 440 Mergansers in the Firth of Forth and 420 off Tentsmuir (Fife). Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis* continue to increase, a record 2700 being counted, of which 790 were at Chew Valley Lake in January and 640 at Blithfield Reservoir (Staffs) in November. Abberton Reservoir held an unprecedented 12,500 Coot *Fulica atra* in November.

These results are given in much greater detail, along with those of the British Trust for Ornithology's Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, in the booklet "Wildfowl & Wader Counts 1988-89" (Salmon *et al.* 1989), available (for £1.50, incl. p & p) from the Research Department at Slimbridge.

Jeff Kirby took over the organisation of the National Wildfowl Counts from David Salmon in 1990. Write to Jeff at Slimbridge if you wish to take part or would like further information.

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Table 1. Maximum total counts of wildfowl, September 1988 - March 1989.

	Great Britain	N. Ireland
Little Grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2200 (Oct)	680 (Sep)
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	7000 (Sep)	2300 (Sep)
Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	9700 (Jan)	1500 (Sep-Dec)
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>	9900 (Nov)	2200 (Nov)
Bewick's Swan <i>C. columbianus bewickii</i>	6300 (Jan)	270 (Dec-Feb)
Whooper Swan <i>C. cygnus</i>	4500 (Nov)	3000 (Nov)
Bean Goose <i>Anser fabalis</i>	370 (Jan)	0
Pink-footed Goose <i>A. brachyrhynchus</i>	176200 (Nov)	0
Eur. White-fronted G. <i>A. a. albifrons</i>	5800 (Feb)	0
Gd. W-fronted Goose <i>A. a. flavirostris</i>	13000 (Nov)	67 (Jan-Feb)
Greylag Goose <i>A. anser</i> (incl. feral)	117400 (Nov)	540 (Jan)
Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis</i>	34700 (Sep)	240 (Oct)
Dark-bellied Brent G. <i>B. b. bernicla</i>	104200 (Jan)	0
Light-bellied Brent Goose <i>B. b. hrota</i>	3000 (Nov)	9400 (Nov)
Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	61700 (Jan)	4500 (Dec)
Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	240000 (Jan)	24100 (Oct)
Gadwall <i>A. strepera</i>	6600 (Dec)	240 (Sep)
Teal <i>A. crecca</i>	104000 (Dec)	5600 (Dec)
Mallard <i>A. platyrhynchos</i>	170600 (Jan)	9700 (Sep)
Pintail <i>A. acuta</i>	27300 (Jan)	340 (Feb)
Garganey <i>A. querquedula</i>	15 (Sep)	0
Shoveler <i>A. clypeata</i>	7000 (Sep)	250 (Oct)
Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	37100 (Jan)	40800 (Nov)
Tufted Duck <i>A. fuligula</i>	50900 (Jan)	18100 (Jan)
Scaup <i>A. marila</i>	6000 (Dec)	2300 (Dec)
Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	11400 (Jan)	13100 (Dec)
Smew <i>Mergus albellus</i>	80 (Jan)	1 (Jan-Mar)
Red-breasted Merganser <i>Mergus serrator</i>	3500 (Oct)	1100 (Oct)
Goosander <i>M. merganser</i>	3800 (Jan)	2 (Jan)
Ruddy Duck <i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	2400 (Jan)	44 (Jan)
Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	88900 (Nov)	6100 (Oct)