



## NATIONAL WILDFOWL COUNTS

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AFTER ten seasons of counting wildfowl intensively the time is ripe for a review of what has been achieved so far and for a forecast of what the future may hold. Inevitably the first few years were fully occupied with forging the investigation, working out the details and recruiting the army of enthusiastic volunteers who alone make it possible. During this time the scheme existed solely by faith, for it was not until 1953 that a long enough series of data had been collected for recourse to be made to the statisticians, who gave their provisional stamp of approval. The start therefore was slow and counters had to wait for a long time before seeing any real return for all their efforts.

In 1954 however a first assay was made to study an individual species, the Mallard, which showed promise but emphasised that a great deal more thought and a more critical technique of analysis was needed. Two years later this bore fruit in a more detailed survey of the fluctuations of the Tufted Duck in Britain during the previous six years. Although this was an improvement on the earlier study it was nevertheless still bedevilled by the need for guesswork to fill the gaps in the records left by the vagaries of weather, sickness and plain domestic crisis.

Since there is no reason to hope that these hiatuses will not continue to occur, our efforts during the past two years have been devoted to devising still further improvements in analysis and towards streamlining the investigation. A part of this programme, entailing a return to first principles and an almost daily study of the wildfowl on one or two waters, is discussed by Matthews in "Basic data from wildfowl counts". This paper, which is summarized on page 24 produces comforting confirmation of one of the earliest precepts, that errors in counts due both to the birds' mobility and to the observers' mistakes cancel out provided that large numbers of counts and observers are involved. It also appears that, at least in the areas investigated, the effects of tide and moon are much less important than supposed.

For a long while the tying of the count dates to the new moon period has proved inconvenient, since it entails comparing years when the dates fell early in the month with years when they fell late. Furthermore for coastal counts a high tide in the middle of a short winter's day is needed for best results, but such conditions *never* occur on parts of the European seaboard at the new moon, and even in Britain there are radical differences in the state of the tide in various areas at the same time. It has therefore been agreed internationally that counts should in future take place in the middle of the calendar month, on the Sunday nearest to the fifteenth.

Experience has also shown that summer holidays interfere with the early counts and that enthusiasm tends to wane by April. It has thus been decided, again with international accord, that attention should be focussed on counts between September and March inclusive, although counts outside these limits are in no way discouraged. Indeed it is hoped to increase their usefulness by developing a separate, intensive study in the breeding season by relatively few observers. Records from past years for example show that certain large waters scattered over the country often carry a big assembly of birds in the early autumn which is presumed to be a concentration of the home population. If this is so a comparison of these gatherings from year to year may give an indication of the size of the breeding population and the success of the season.

Whilst all this has been going on, the records already collected have not been lying idle. In early 1957 all available information on the Brent Goose was assembled and despatched to Dr. Finn Salomonsen in Denmark who had been asked by the International Wildfowl Research Bureau to report on the status of the species in N.W. Europe. His recently published findings, which are summarised on page 93 are a milestone in international co-operation, for Britain was only one of many countries to make their records available.

Since then a second combined operation has been mounted with the appointment by the Bureau of C. S. P. Van Dam of Holland to study the European Mallard. Beginning with the British data, which he found to be the most comprehensive, he spent ten days at Slimbridge in January 1958 testing various methods of analysis and deciding on the best course to adopt. On his return in July to collect the final correlation of the British figures, he met Dr. H. M. Thamdrup, the national organizer of the Danish wildfowl counts, and many of our mutual problems were discussed at length.

In many ways Van Dam's task is more complex than Salomonsen's in that Mallard have a much wider distribution than Brents, and he is faced with a mass of data of widely varying quality. In fact one of the more important parts of his work is to assess the merits of wildfowl counts in each country and to recommend a standard method. In the past each country, although using the same count dates, has developed its own system of analysis in the light of its own peculiar problems, but with this new phase of international co-operation, and with many new countries beginning to participate, some conformity is essential.

Hugh Boyd has also used the wildfowl count records extensively in his detailed work on the status and distribution of the Greylag Goose in Britain which is published in this report. It is a further example of the uses to which the data can be put, as although the counts were never designed to give such a complete picture as this, they do provide a generous framework on which to base more detailed enquiries. Nor do we keep all these records for our own sole use, for there is a steady demand from workers outside the Trust for information to assist them in their researches. Indeed at one time the spate of requests became so heavy that it threatened to interfere with our own work and we had to insist that people must come and extract their own data. They have, of course, also to establish their bona fides and to conform to certain restrictions, as the records are confidential and detailed information may not be published without the permission of landowners.

One rather unusual study has also been carried out by S. McClelland who for three seasons ran a British Trust for Ornithology investigation into the status of the Coot. Normally this species is not included in the wildfowl counts but at the special request of the B.T.O. wildfowl counters were asked to help and so save a vast duplication of effort. In addition to these national investigations many counters use the data which they themselves have collected in specialised studies of the wildfowl in their area or even on a particular water. R. C. Homes, for example, who has been organising counts in the London area since before the war, has just published a paper on the wildfowl in that area during the past ten years, whilst A. R. M. Blake is studying the importance to wildfowl of minor waters in the west Midlands. Such work is of the greatest value to us in our more general research on wildfowl as the very detail of it brings to light points which might otherwise go unnoticed, and which often have a wider application.

In particular these local studies are complementary to the wildfowl counts in yet another form of analysis which is being undertaken. In 1955 the Nature Conservancy asked the Wildfowl Trust to consider the status of the British population of all species of wildfowl with particular reference to distribution, to the amount of habitat available and to the degree of conservation already afforded. This work, now nearing completion, takes the form of a survey of the wildfowl in each region, and in years to come will serve as a contemporary record of present conditions. It is far from relying solely on the results of the counts for its information, although they are much used, but incorporates the advice and criticism of many other people, including wildfowlers and wildfowling clubs. As each instalment is completed it is presented at informal meetings in London to which the Director-General of the Nature Conservancy invites representatives of the Wildfowlers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, the British Field Sports Society and the Wildfowl Trust to discuss with him in confidence matters of future policy and the need for further conservation. This review, which aims to give a balanced perspective of current conditions, is probably amongst the most important uses to which the wildfowl count data has been put at the present time.

Such then are the ramifications of the wildfowl count scheme which have built up during the first ten years. The counts have already proved to be an invaluable source of information, and will increase in value with every year that passes. Some areas however are still hardly covered at all and it is hoped that this report may stimulate new recruits to offer their services for one Sunday afternoon a month. Anyone living in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland or N.W. Scotland and the Outer Isles is assured of a rapturous welcome, but there is room and to spare for everyone, everywhere.

