

PINK-FOOTED AND GREYLAG GEESE IN BRITAIN

16th/17th March 1985

The fourth in the present series of spring censuses of Pink-footed Anser brachyrhynchus and Greylag Geese A. anser in Britain was held over the weekend of 16th/17th March 1985. Although some areas were affected by snow, overall counting conditions were good. The totals counted were 97,000 Pinkfeet and 71,000 Greylags. These compare with the counts in November 1984, which were severely disrupted by the weather, of 86,000 Pinkfeet and 64,000 Greylags. As well as confirming the under-counting which must have occurred in the November 1984 census, the March 1985 Pinkfoot total reinforces the view, based on age ratios, that the true November total was somewhat in excess of 100,000. This is discussed further under the species heading below. The full breakdown of the counts is shown in the table overleaf, together with comparisons from the previous winter.

Weather and general conditions

Although the weather over most of the country was generally fine, with little wind, clear skies, and sharp night frosts, scattered snow showers, some of them very heavy, did hinder both the counts and counters alike, particularly in the Borders, Angus, and the Highland Region, immobilising counters' cars, and scattering the geese. Fortunately such falls were very localised; in one valley I visited, one side was completely free of snow while the roads in the other half were only negotiable with great difficulty. Counting in the Borders was probably the worst affected by the snow, and it is thought certain that at least some geese were missed in this area. Elsewhere, the problems were not so bad, or counters were able to provide figures based on earlier visits.

PINKFEET

In the Report on the November 1984 census, which was so seriously affected by the weather, I suggested that given the breeding success of 20.2%, and using the drop in numbers which occurred between the November 1983 and March 1984 censuses as an indication of losses, the true total was possibly around 106,000 rather than the 86,000 actually counted. In fact a mathematical error crept in (!), and the calculated total should have been 110,000. With the March 1985 count now available we have a slightly different way of checking this suggestion, by applying to it the average percentage drop from November to March noted in each of the previous three winters, since the spring censuses restarted. In the winters 1981-2 to 1983-4, the average decline from November to March was 15.1%. If the decline has been the same this winter then the November 1984 total should have been around 114,000, which is reasonably close to the earlier estimate. In contrast to the Greylags (see over), it does seem as though the March censuses of Pinkfeet are a success. Not only are they working as well as the November censuses (or even better this winter), but it has now been shown that if anything does go wrong with one of the latter, then the following March census stands a good chance of helping to fill in the missing data.

The regional distribution of the Pinkfeet, set out in the table on page 3, shows a different picture when compared with March 1984. South-west Scotland was still very important,

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Numbers of Pinkfeet and Greylags in Britain, Nov.1983 to Mar.1985

Regional, district and county totals are rounded to the nearest 10, national totals to the nearest 1000. Feral geese are omitted where identifiable.

	PINKFEET				GREYLAGS			
	13 Nov 1983	19 Mar 1984	18 Nov 1984	17 Mar 1985	13 Nov 1983	19 Mar 1984	18 Nov 1984	17 Mar 1985
Orkney	-	-	-	-	680	870	310	980
Highland								
Caithness	-	-	-	-	7450	1200	1700	1950
Sutherland	-	-	-	-	3130	-	-	-
Ross & Cromarty	40	3750	410	1030	1070	1480	5530	1190
Inverness	-	1600	-	3500	500	280	-	600
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	-	410	540	1360	2800
Nairn	-	-	-	-	-	10	50	-
Grampian								
Moray	-	-	-	-	810	1250	1860	1550
Banff & Buchan	2850	3350	8850	3250	5600	4250	2230	10750
Gordon	10700	11000	7400	11400	7020	10940	6920	10140
Kincardine & Deeside	-	-	-	50	6000	1300	7000	3000
Tayside								
Angus	13220	4040	11860	4840	7900	360	4530	3700
Perth & Kinross	14260	11740	11780	18190	18230	4930	12060	12390
Central								
Stirling	3730	4430	1350	5630	250	2620	350	530
Fife	8000	3100	2500	4000	1250	-	-	1750
Lothian								
West Lothian	2000	370	490	4500	1980	-	580	-
Midlothian	13600	830	70	2020	930	-	220	-
East Lothian	3420	-	4580	160	720	320	250	530
Borders								
Tweeddale	3600	1160	2700	4550	30	-	-	-
Roxburgh	1800	1650	3000	-	3850	1620	1260	2430
Berwickshire	3340	20	-	-	580	-	930	10
Strathclyde								
Argyll & Bute	-	-	-	-	3750	2310	4170	2760
Cunningham	-	-	-	-	130	210	170	150
Dunbarton	-	-	-	-	350	300	2000	1000
Strathkelvin	-	-	-	-	-	180	300	-
Lanark	290	190	1140	1430	-	160	-	150
Renfrew	-	-	-	-	-	220	150	420
Kyle & Carrick	-	-	-	-	490	420	580	310
Dumfries & Galloway								
Wigtown	-	9510	-	12200	3320	1800	2580	2770
Stewartry	-	-	-	50	1900	2180	2280	1360
Nithsdale	2620	20850	4630	10370	300	2750	720	3750
Cumbria	20	3950	-	6500	800	830	630	850
Northumberland	80	-	190	-	2300	4930	3520	2750
Lancashire	16280	4800	15610	3550	-	-	-	70
Humberside	-	400	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lincolnshire	300	220	320	10	-	-	-	-
Norfolk	970	1070	9000	10	-	-	-	-
 BRITISH TOTAL	 101000	 88000	 86000	 97000	 82000	 48000	 64000	 71000

but numbers in England were well down. In both South-east and East-central Scotland there were noticeably more geese than in the previous year, though slightly fewer in North Scotland. There was some evidence of hard weather movements south earlier in the winter, but it would appear from the table as if the birds had long since found their way back north again.

GREYLAGS

Following the rather disappointing count in November 1984, I suggested that we might have expected the population to be at least 20,000 more than the 64,000 actually counted. However, such calculations had to be more tentative than for the Pinkfeet, because of rather small samples age-counted to give breeding success, and because we did not have such a good through the winter measure of losses. We have now found 71,000 geese in March 1985, which does indeed indicate that the November 1984 figure must have been quite a lot higher. Using the difference between past November and March censuses is a lot riskier for the Greylags than it is for the Pinkfeet, however. The March counts have varied from about 66% of the previous November count to as low as 54%. It is very clear from these figures that significant numbers of birds are being missed, yet there is nothing to suggest that the proportion being missed might be the same each time. More than in past March censuses, there were several substantial flocks of Greylags in parts of North and East-central Scotland, and coverage of these areas was at least as good as in past years, if not better. The snow certainly interfered with counting in the Borders, and at least some Greylags will have been missed here.

If the counting in March 1985 was no better than in previous March censuses, then the November 1984 could have been as high as 105,000 or even 110,000. If, though, as does seem possible, it was rather better in coverage, then the November figure would come down to perhaps 95,000 to 100,000. Given good counting conditions and coverage in November 1985 it will be possible to interpolate a figure based on breeding success data, so we can have another go then.

As with the Pinkfeet, the regional distribution shows fewer birds in England, and more in East-central Scotland than in the previous year, as well as a slight increase in the North Scotland region.

Regional distribution of Pinkfeet and Greylags, Nov.1983 to Mar.1985.

	PINKFEET				GREYLAGS			
	Nov. 1983	Mar. 1984	Nov. 1984	Mar. 1985	Nov. 1983	Mar. 1984	Nov. 1984	Mar. 1985
North Scotland	13.4	22.5	19.4	19.8	40.1	45.8	42.0	46.7
East-central Scotland	38.8	26.5	32.0	33.6	33.9	16.5	26.4	26.0
South-east Scotland	27.5	4.6	12.6	11.5	9.9	4.0	5.0	4.2
South-west Scotland	2.9	34.9	6.7	31.4	12.3	21.8	20.1	17.9
North England	16.2	10.0	18.4	3.6	3.8	11.9	6.5	5.2
East England	1.2	1.5	10.9	0.1	-	-	-	-

Figures are percentages of total populations.

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