

THE NUMBERS OF GREYLAG AND PINK-FOOTED GESE
IN BRITAIN ON 4th/5th MARCH 1967

About 43,000 Greylag Geese Anser anser and 47,000 Pink-footed Geese A. brachyrhynchus were found in Britain on 4th and 5th March 1967.

The numbers of geese believed to be roosting in each county regularly visited by them are listed below. The county figures are rounded to the nearest ten and the national total to the nearest thousand. Feral flocks of Greylags are excluded wherever separable by locality from immigrants. Where the March figures are given in brackets there are reasons for supposing that not all the geese present were found.

	GREYLAGS			PINKFEET		
	Mar.1967	Nov.1966	Mar.1966	Mar.1967	Nov.1966	Mar.1966
Orkney	?	0	50	-	-	-
Caithness	20	290	30	-	-	-
Ross and Cromarty	1260	1850	980	(1080)	1790	2050
Inverness	(310)	750	150	40	0	0
Nairn, Moray	1170	1370	650	0	0	150
Aberdeen	5450	4560	3040	3410	14290	4920
Angus, Kincardine	1510	5280	1200	4890	890	2930
Perth	17700	31440	10240	11320	24520	12080
Fife	4750	410	1010	9070	3950	4880
Kinross	400	2180	50	1540	5590	2500
Stirling	0	10	490	0	0	410
Clackmannan	50	0	0	0	0	0
Dumbarton	190	300	110	0	0	10
Lanark	(250)	240	690	(540)	2550	1140
Midlothian	310	730	680	4930	1460	4440
East Lothian	0	-	-	200	2750	40
Berwick	0	220	50	620	4200	340
Peebles	10	420	-	640	2300	1280
Roxburgh	400	50	320	0	450	0
Argyll	(1370)	1190	1200	-	-	-
Bute	5480	3800	3100	-	-	-
Renfrew	0	0	20	-	-	-
Ayr	270	10	310	-	-	-
Wigtown	(280)	3310	3950	310	0	650
Kirkcudbright	420	700	880	(920)	290	1410
Dumfries	680	690	1790	4270	3700	1920
Northumberland	20	140	10	-	-	-
Cumberland	1080	310	850	2120	0	3500
Westmorland	170	80	240	-	-	-
Lancashire	-	-	-	860	2860	0
Yorkshire	-	-	-	330	1750	350
Lincolnshire	-	-	-	0	2560	0
Norfolk	-	-	-	0	10	0
Cambridgeshire	-	-	-	30	0	0
Anglesey	30	0	0	-	-	-
BRITISH TOTAL	43000	60000	32000	47000	76000	45000

The weather during the week-end varied from pleasant to frightful and some observers had difficult tasks, but in most counties the watch on known roosts was thorough. Nevertheless it seems likely that in this as in most other March counts an appreciable number of geese have escaped detection. The evidence is arithmetical. The November numbers have always been much larger than those in March. If the numbers of geese counted in March are compared with the numbers counted in the previous November, the difference between them represents apparent losses. Similarly the increase from the March count to that in the following November represents gains. If the March and November censuses were both fully efficient the losses would be a measure of winter mortality while the gains would be equivalent to "(young/

"(young birds reaching Britain) - (losses of adults between March and November)". In practice the apparent winter losses in the last five years have been rather high (Greylags - average 26%, range 21-29%; Pinkfoot - average 34%, range 15-48%) and the apparent summer gains have been very high. The gains in 1965-66 have varied between 21 and 38% for Greylags (average 30%) and from 31 to 43% for Pinkfoot (average 39%). We have measured the annual production of young geese by looking at the flocks in autumn. There are sampling problems involved but the picture is fairly clear and it shows that in each year, for both species, the apparent gains from March to the following November have been greater, not less, than the proportion of young geese found.

The November counts are fairly reliable, because the geese are then concentrated in comparatively few places and our knowledge of distribution in the autumn is based on many years experience backed up by hundreds of recoveries of ringed birds. The feeding behaviour of the geese in autumn is also much simpler than in spring.

The repeated discrepancies between the figures point to the conclusion that the March counts are inefficient. The 1967 count was arranged early in the month in an attempt to exclude the possibility that some geese were escaping the census by retiring to Iceland during March, but the very mild winter may well have made this attempt futile. The two other possibilities are that there are some important regular spring haunts which we still know nothing about or that substantial numbers of geese living in the areas we look at escape detection. The last of these seems the most likely. In the spring most geese are feeding on grass and many frequent 'parking-out' places on rough pasture, mosses or floods which may also serve as temporary roosts. This was brought home to me very clearly in Perthshire this month when our counts at several orthodox roosts were much lower than the counts we obtained by searching for geese during the day.

Even though the March counts may continue to be incomplete, they are worth persevering with because they are of considerable value as the only extensive records of goose distribution at a time of year when the possibility of serious agricultural damage by geese is greatest. If we want to keep the splendid number of grey geese we now have in Britain in winter we need to have a sound basis of facts from which to argue against the unnecessarily severe repressive measures that some farmers have already asked for.

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