

Dave Stroud, CSO, GBHQ

When you see this? Yes

**T**HE fortunes of Greenland White-fronted Geese have ebbed and flowed in the last 18 months, ever since the species rose to media stardom following the controversy over Duich Moss on the Isle of Islay last year (THE GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE, April 1985). At that time the prospect for the geese, which roost and feed on this internationally important peatland complex, looked poor. The nadir came on the night when the conservationists, among them David Bellamy, were apparently defeated at a well-televised public meeting in Bowmore. There appeared to be little chance of halting the slow destruction of yet another peat bog, and peat cutting over the moss for use in the island's whisky industry seemed destined to proceed, despite the suitability of several alternative sites.

But the story did not finish there. The approval of planning permission by the Secretary of State for Scotland was in contravention of the EEC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds, since the development would lead to the destruction of the habitat of a threatened species. Consequently, after several months of consultation with Scottish Office officials and conservation bodies, the European Commission stated that the case was to be taken before the European Court. It requested the British government to revoke planning permission even at that late stage, with work on drains and access roads well underway. The Commission also urged the government to press Scottish Malt Distillers to seek another less ecologically important peatland site and to declare Duich Moss a Special Protection Area under European law, a designation which conservation bodies had proposed in 1984.

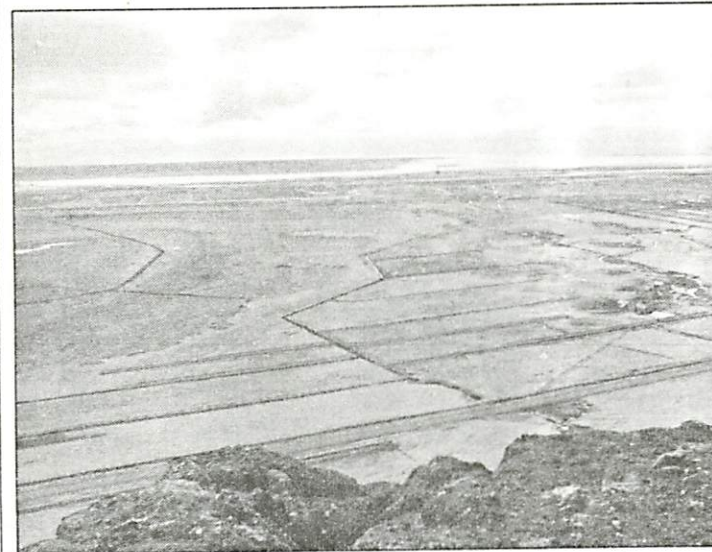
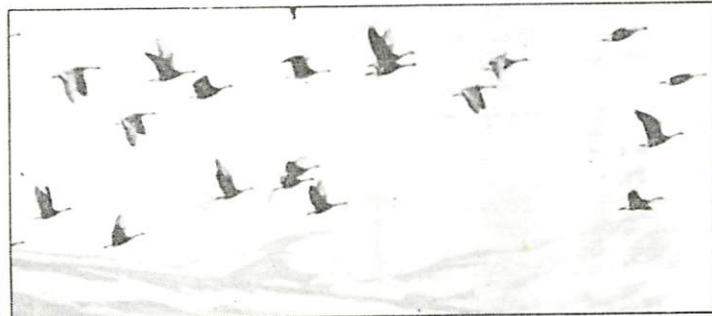
In May the Scottish Development Department announced that, in agreement with Scottish Malt Distillers, work on Duich Moss had been suspended for the present while another site for peat cutting at Castlehill on Islay is investigated. This appeared to be good news for the geese, but newspaper headlines like 'Geese win on whisky' belie the fact that as yet planning permission has not been revoked.

**D**ITCHES on the bog have not yet been blocked and are still draining the area, resulting in progressive damage to its delicate ecology. Duich Moss will not be safeguarded until planning permission is withdrawn and the site re-instated and until this occurs the British government is still in breach of the Wild Birds Directive.

EEC intervention in a case such as this is a valuable last resort in the protection of threatened sites important for their ecological or geological interest. This intervention should not be necessary, however, if the British government was to take its responsibility to international conservation more seriously. At present British peatland sites of high scientific

# A DRAIN ON GEESE

by Ian Francis



**A campaign to save the habitat of White-fronted Geese (top) on Duich Moss has had limited success. Now their Icelandic staging posts are being drained for agriculture (above)**

value are still being lost.

The monitoring of site destruction or deterioration is no easy matter. In the case of Duich Moss, the development was 'industrial' and therefore within the scope of planning laws. Unfortunately, many changes due to agriculture and forestry are not subject to planning laws and may proceed unchecked, unless the area concerned is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Whatever the designation, it is often the study of an individual species closely tied to a particular habitat which draws attention to land-use changes.

Greenland White-fronted Geese are closely linked with peatlands; they winter on peatlands and unimproved pastures in the British Isles, breed on bogs in the Greenland tundra, and feed on sedge meadows, bogs and hay-fields in Iceland as they fly between the two in spring and autumn. I recently visited Iceland as part of continuing research by the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study to observe the geese on passage in the spring and assess the status of the habitats in which they feed during migration.

Prior to my visit, it was not clear how many geese actually passed

through Iceland in the spring. There are obvious difficulties in carrying out a census in such wild and boggy terrain. It was known that at least half of the estimated 20,000 world population staged in Iceland in autumn, and it was suspected that in fact the full population stopped there. In the spring the importance of Iceland as a staging post could be great, since feeding on migration, prior to nesting, is known to be very important to the breeding success of Arctic nesting geese.

This spring, at least 3500 White-fronts were found in Iceland. The census was not complete and it is likely that many more were present but not counted. The geese are thought to be confined to the south and west coasts of the country in vast lowland plains containing most of the agricultural land in Iceland. In fact, the terrain is very different to traditional images of the country, and both staging areas, Olfusa to Landeyjar in the south and Myrar in the west, are relatively little visited by non-Icelanders. Although the backdrop is spectacular, the agricultural areas are flat and composed of hay meadows, bogs, sedge-dominated wetlands and lava outcrops. Some fields are wet, but the majority are improved, and indeed one of the features of both areas is the large amount of drainage which has occurred.

**V**AST ditches cut parallel lines through what was once wetland, and such activity has heralded a change in agricultural practice in recent decades. Once, the Icelandic haymaking economy was based on the harvesting of highly nutritious sedge species, a practice which preserved vast areas of wetland. As technology changed, higher input farming involving drainage was found to produce higher yields and this change caught on rapidly. Although Iceland now holds large EEC-like food surpluses, and is reviewing drainage grants, this shift in agricultural practice has left more than 60 per cent of Iceland's bogs drained.

I found many White-fronted Geese in Iceland not on bogs but on the large number of improved fields. The effects of this change in behaviour of the geese have yet to be assessed, but the reduction of wetland area may be implicated in its cause and it may make White-fronted Geese more vulnerable to shooting by making them more accessible. However, it is clear that this change in land use in Iceland places greater emphasis upon the importance of British and Irish bogs. Peatlands are under threat in many parts of the world, even in a country as sparsely populated as Iceland. It must be our role to ensure that British peat bogs remain for the benefit of all the species that depend on them.

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