

INTERIM REPORT OF THE BRITISH GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE CENSUS
AUTUMN 1984

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The census of Greenland White-fronted Geese wintering in Britain in November 1984 was the third autumn count since current monitoring began. This report summarises counts received to date with details of the proportion of young birds in the autumn flocks. A complete report on the winter distribution and abundance of Greenland Whitefronts will be produced after the spring census.

ARRIVAL DATES

Although a single bird was seen on Islay on September 13th, the first arrivals were not seen until 2nd October when a flock of 79 was seen at Gruinart. The build-up on Islay continued to about 10th October. This is a very early arrival and at other British sites first sightings or dates of definite arrivals were similarly early and were as follows: Loch Ken 6 October; Dyfi 7 October; Orkney 9 October; Loch Eye 10 October; Loch Lomond 11 October; Danna 15 October; Caithness 17 October; Moine Mhòr 25 October; Arnol, Lewis 29 October; Snizort, Skye 3 November.

PRODUCTIVITY IN 1984

The spring weather conditions in Greenland were very severe with one of the latest spring thaws on record and the fourth coldest winter since records began. Deep snow lay throughout May, melting only in early June. Arrival dates, laying and hatching dates were all significantly^{later} than in 1979, and there was a high predation rate due to Arctic Foxes within an area intensively studied. These factors suggested that the breeding success of the population would have been severely reduced but the figures show an average breeding season (Table 1).

At the main British haunt of Islay, there were 12.1% young in the autumn flocks, close to the long-term mean of 14.6% young (mean for 1962 - 1983). At Wexford, Ireland, breeding performance was similarly close to the long-term mean for that wintering area, and as usual, was slightly higher than on Islay. Elsewhere in Britain the breeding performance seems to have been greater than on Islay, unlike the situation found after the 1982 and 1983 breeding seasons. However, the sample sizes are relatively small and may not be strictly representative of the breeding performance of birds away from Islay. Average brood sizes (Table 1) were high both on Islay and elsewhere.

During July, the weather in west Greenland was calm and hot, and these 'heatwave' conditions during the hatching and early fledging period, may have more than offset the effects of the late spring on the breeding adults by reducing gosling mortality. This is also suggested by the weather in mid-summer 1983 which was cold, wet and foggy. This resulted in a poor breeding season with only 9% young produced by Islay birds.

POPULATION

Spring 1984

The census of last winter found 8,188 Greenland Whitefronts in Britain during November 1983 but only 7,494 in March/April 1984. Since the publication of last winter's census, further counts have come to hand which suggest that the spring total was underestimated. The March/April count found 7,926 geese, a difference of only 262 (3.2%) from the autumn total. The revised area totals are given in Table 2 and a revised table of peak monthly counts at all sites during 1983/84

will be given in the annual report following this winter's counts.

Autumn 1984

The British population in November was found to be 9,616, a 17% increase on the autumn 1983 total. Peak monthly counts (received to date) from October to December, are given in Table 3. This increase is larger than would be expected solely on the basis of a greater number of young produced in 1984 (compared with 1983). An estimated 1,298 young were produced by British geese in 1984 (in 449 families), yet the increase is of 1,428 between years. It is thought that the increase may, to an extent, have been due to better counting at some sites. In particular, a thorough survey of Coll and Tiree found a total for both islands of 1,061 compared to the previous maximum of 792. Taken together, Coll and Tiree now appear to be the most important wintering area in Britain after Islay.

There may also have been some movement from Ireland which might account for some of the increase. Five of the 44 geese marked with Darvic neck-collars at Wexford, Ireland have been seen at three Scottish sites and appear to be wintering. No great emphasis can be placed on these movements however, since the present Irish ringing scheme is less than a year old and this is the first winter in which such movements could have been demonstrated. It does indicate the desirability of thoroughly scanning flocks for Darvic ringed birds in order to elucidate between site movements.

The increase in numbers has been similar at different sites. The proportion of the British total on Islay is 55% compared with 56% in autumn 1983. A full discussion of counts and coverage, both on Islay and elsewhere, will be given at the end of the winter in our annual report on British Greenland White-fronted Geese.

DARVICS

In July 1984, 88 Greenland White-fronted Geese were caught and Darvic ringed in Eqaalungmiut Nunaat, west Greenland. These birds were caught in the same area where 96 geese had been similarly ringed in 1979. Sightings of ringed geese seen so far this winter are as follows:

1979 ringed birds

- A14 Cluanach, Islay; the same site as the previous five winters.
- A16 Wesfield, Caithness; same site as 79/80, 81/82 and 82/83.
- A18 Avenvogie, Islay; the same site as the previous five winters.
- A32 Avenvogie, Islay; paired to A18 - has lost Darvic since April '84
- A62 Ardnave Point, Islay; not previously seen since 1979.
- A85 Kepolls, Islay; not previously seen since 1979.

1984 ringed birds

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| K10 Robolls, Islay | K33 North Slob, Wexford |
| K23 North Slob, Wexford | K34 North Slob, Wexford |
| K24 Leorin, Islay | K35 North Slob, Wexford |
| K25 North Slob, Wexford | K41 Leorin, Islay |
| K26 Coultorsay, Islay | K45 Wester Ellister, Islay |
| K31 Redhouses, Islay | K51 North Slob, Wexford |

Additionally, two birds were shot on passage in Iceland during October; details of these birds are still awaited. About a further 10 birds are present on Islay but have not yet been read.

Wexford ringed birds

Two geese with white neck collars were seen at Machrihanish, Kintyre in November (but not read) and a single bird with an unread orange collar seen at Cornabus, Islay in late October. Another pair with orange collars (5JF & 6JF) have been present at Bridgend, Islay from October to the present.

A further 140 birds were successfully caught and ringed at Wexford in October and of these about 95% have been subsequently seen at Wexford. Following the pattern of the birds marked in spring 1984 some of these geese may occur in British flocks next winter.

OBSERVERS ARE ESPECIALLY ASKED TO CHECK FLOCKS FOR BOTH LEG RINGS AND NECK COLLARS DURING THE REMAINDER OF THIS WINTER. Negative checks of flocks are as useful as confirmed sightings and should be recorded.

SITE THREATS

Eilean na Muice Dubh, Islay

The report of the 1983/84 census gave details of the events leading to the granting of planning permission for the bog Eilean na Muice Dubh by the Secretary of State for Scotland. This bog is the most important roost site in Britain for Greenland White-fronted Geese and the commercial peat cutting there by Scottish Malt Distillers Ltd. is likely to severely affect both the bog and the geese roosting there.

When granting planning permission in July, the Secretary of State invited both the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study (GWGS) to help frame conditions to 'minimise the impact of the development on the bog'. The NCC did so under duress, stating that the:

"Council wish to make clear their view that commercial peat extraction anywhere within the area to which the application refers will damage the special scientific interest of the site, and that no conditions attached to the planning permission can prevent that damage or ameliorate its long term effect to a satisfactory degree."

The NCC further stated that

"a detailed hydrological survey by an independent expert is an essential prerequisite for framing conditions aimed at minimising damage to the site."

Their most important proposal was that there should be a moratorium on the development of the site whilst such a survey (which would take 2-3 years) took place. Stocks of peat could be supplied to the distillery from a nearby area cut commercially. These stocks would last at least 7 years, a more than adequate period for such an environmental impact analysis to be undertaken. Thus, the NCC stated that

"as the first condition of the planning permission, no work be started until a detailed hydrological survey has been carried out by independent experts, and its results made available to the NCC, so that detailed conditions relating to the operations can be formulated for the Secretary of State's subsequent consideration."

The GWGS agreed that, if the bog was to be cut at all, then such a moratorium and survey was essential.

In conditions announced at Christmas, the Secretary of State gave permission for construction work to start on 1 April 1985, rejecting NCC's advised moratorium. While conditions have been attached, they are scarcely more than would be expected on any planning consent. In the Scottish Office Press Release (timed to receive minimum media attention), great stress is laid on a restriction to operate the site between 1 April - 30 September. This will evidently 'minimise disturbance' to the geese. Apart from the fact that peat is not normally cut in winter anyway, this again shows a failure to understand or accept the main theme of the objections against the development; that the threat to the site, and geese, comes from habitat loss and hydrological change, and not from the effects of immediate physical disturbance.

One of the most worrying aspects of this case, aside from its immediate effects on the specific site, is the almost complete rejection of the NCC's advice by the Scottish Office and Secretary of State. If this can be so in the case of such an internationally important site, less important areas faced with large industrial/ commercial development, would seem to have even less chance of survival. It seems that conservation in Scotland still has a long way to go before being seen as a valid land-use consideration by planning authorities.

Unless the European Commission intervenes, construction of the access road across Eilean na Muice Dubh will start on 1 April.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are again pleased to be able to record our thanks to all those who have helped this autumn with either counts, checking for Darvic rings or with aspects of the Eilean na Muice Dubh case. Your continued support is our most valuable asset.

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SPRING CENSUS 1985

The dates for the spring census are 30 March - 3 April. If it proves impossible to count during this period, please count as close to the census dates as possible. Whilst the international autumn and spring counts have priority, we are always glad of any counts of Greenland Whitefronts through the winter. We would be grateful as always, for departure dates or last sighting dates in April. Thank you very much.

Please send completed census forms to:

David A. Stroud
Greenland White-fronted Goose Study,
Kindrochid,
Sanaig,
Bruichladdich,
Islay, Argyll. PA44 7FP

January 1985

The counts given in this report are of a provisional nature and totals may change. Please do not cite these totals without first referring to the address below for up-to-date information.

Table 1.

SUMMARY OF YOUNG PRESENT IN SAMPLES AGED, AUTUMN 1984

	Total aged	Number of young	% of young	Number of broods	Mean brood size	Frequency of broods						
						1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Islay	1920	232	12.1%	80	2.84	21	11	20	19	6	3	-
Rest of Scotland	975	161	16.5%	51	2.98	8	16	12	6	5	1	3
England	4	1										
Wales	73	8	11.0%	3	2.67	1		1	1			
TOTAL BRITAIN	2972	402	13.5%	134	2.89	30	27	33	26	11	4	3

Table 2.

REGIONAL TOTALS 1983/84 AND 1984/85

	<u>November 1983</u>	<u>April 1984</u>	<u>November 1984</u>
North-east Scotland	315	410	376
North-west Scotland	177	136	210
North Argyll	985	896	1304
South Argyll: Islay	4592	4198	5256
Other sites	1342	1484	1634
Galloway	683	720	753
England	1	4	10
Wales	93	78	73
BRITISH TOTAL	8188	7926	9616

Table 3.

PEAK MONTHLY COUNTS AT BRITISH GREENLAND WHITEFRONT WINTERING SITES

	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
		1 - 16 17 - 30	
NORTH-EAST SCOTLAND			
Orkney: Tankerness Loch/Holm	0		0
The Loons/ Hundland	47	47	<u>47</u>
Caithness: Westfield			140
Loch Heilien	<u>109</u>		(80+)
Loch Scarmclate area		c50	<u>70</u>
Loch Eye	9		<u>12</u>
NORTH-WEST SCOTLAND			
Lewis: Shawbost/ Barvas	<u>c28</u>		[0]
Benbecula: Nunton/ Griminish			[0]
South Uist: Loch Hallan	c60	<u>26</u>	25
Loch Bee			<u>c60</u>
Skye: Loch Snizort		45	47
Broadford			<u>[20]</u>
Borneskaig		17	
Longa Island & Gairloch			[0]
Muck			<u>[29]</u>
NORTH ARGYLL			
Tiree: Loch Riaghain			70
The Reef			<u>223</u>
Baugh			<u>159</u>
Loch a' Phuill			<u>66</u>
Crossapol			<u>102</u>
Coll: Uig/ Ballard		<u>133</u>	
Claid/ Arnabost		<u>308</u>	
Lismore Island/ Benderloch		<u>134</u>	
Loch Shiel/ Kentra Moss			[44]
Isle of Mull: Loch Poit na h-I		0	46
Loch Assapoll	4	21	<u>19</u>
SOUTH ARGYLL			
Colonsay			[29]
Jura: Lowlandsman Bay			36
Loch a' Chruic Bhric			<u>72</u>
Islay	3362		5256
Danna	<u>c50</u>		4462
Moine Mhòr	<u>17</u>		
Rhunahaorine			855
Machrihanish			<u>404</u>
Bute			
Loch Lomond: Endrick Mouth			<u>122</u>
East Killichen, River Kelvin			<u>84</u>
			2
GALLOWAY			
Stranraer			420
Bladnoch Valley			<u>[43]</u>
Creetown & Cree Valley			[0]
Loch Ken			<u>[290]</u>
Ayrshire			<u>[0]</u>
ENGLAND			
SW Lancashire: Altcar		<u>2</u>	
Martin Mere			1
Walney Island, Morecombe Bay			<u>2</u>

	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER		DECEMBER
		1 - 16	17 - 30	
WALES				
Dyfi Estuary/ Cors Fochno	57	76	<u>73</u>	73
Powys: Newton area	c20	+	<u>0</u>	0

Notes:

Counts underlined have been used in the calculation of regional and national totals. Counts in square brackets are estimates taken from winter 1983/84 where no accurate count has been made this season.

Lismore Island and Eriska on the nearby mainland have been treated as a single site for the purposes of this census. Information has come to hand that a small flock of Greenland Whitefronts still winter on Muck. Further information on these sites will be given in the annual report.

Table 4.

MONTHLY COUNTS, BY AREA, OF GREENLAND WHITEFRONTS ON ISLAY, AUTUMN 1984

	October 25	October 26	November 21	November 22	December 19	December 20
Rhinns	68	12	122	217	546	310
Gorm	438	319	286	390	249	331
Gruinart	519	716	471	884	538	610
Kilmeny	647	1285	891	1321	1281	1099
Laggan	247	469	426	777	758	467
Glen	120	25	200	340	280	468
Ardtalla	0	0	0	95	21	0
Oa	408	536	1294	1232	789	727
ISLAY TOTAL	2447	3362	3690	5256	4462	4012