

GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GEESE IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES

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and

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Introduction

The world population of Greenland White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons flavirostris* breeds in west Greenland and winters exclusively in Ireland, north-west Scotland, and two sites in Wales. Ruttledge & Ogilvie (1979) estimated a total of 14,300-16,600 birds in the late 1970s, a marked decline from 17,500-23,000 in the 1950s. Detailed census throughout the wintering range since 1982/83 has shown a recovery of the population to 1950s levels due to protective legislation (see below), and the effects of an outstanding breeding season in 1985.

While this increase is encouraging, total counts hide the continuous decline of many smaller more remote flocks on the Scottish islands and northern mainland away from the major wintering haunts on Islay and adjacent Argyll resorts.

The Outer Hebrides have in the past held as many as four different flocks of Greenland White-fronted Geese, although at present, geese are known from but three sites. The present paper outlines our scant knowledge of these birds and charts the decline of this typically Hebridean bird.

1. LEWIS Loch Arnol/Shawbost (NB24/34)

This site is not mentioned in either Atkinson-Willes (1963) or Ruttledge & Ogilvie (1979), and although Berry (1939) mentions their presence on Lewis, no details of sites are given. The Shawbost area has been used by a regular wintering flock since at least 1971, when 55 were present. Numbers had declined to 30-40 in the late 1970s and regular counting has shown a sad decline to a maximum of 18 in 1987/88.

The flock winters between the settlements of Barvas (NB345493) and North Shawbost (NB265475) on the north-western coast of Lewis. The former is rough grazing shared with sheep whilst the latter is predominantly peaty bog surrounded by croftland. Sometimes the geese resort to the short turf and pools of the headland Aird Mhor Bragair (NB270493) where they are safer from disturbance and where they probably roost. The bog adjacent to Loch Arnol (NB300483) is also used as a feeding site.

The flock seems to decrease in size throughout the season, e.g. 1981/82, and shooting by several poachers both in and out of the close season seems the cause. In 1982/83, the flock was much disturbed, once or more each week by local guns until 31 January, and although only one was seen to be shot, it is thought that undoubtedly more

were taken. Although much of this poaching seems deliberate, confusion with Greylags (*Anser anser*) probably also occurs. With numbers so small, the flock seemed distinctly threatened unless the shooting pressure abated. Although the local keeper keeps a very careful eye on the geese and the activity of known poachers, this situation gives continued cause for concern..

2. NORTH UIST

This island seems presently to hold no regularly wintering flock of Whitefronts. Between 15 and 50 seem to have frequented coastal locations in the south and south-west of the island earlier this century (Berry 1939), but by the time of Atkinson-Willes (1963), numbers seem to have fallen to 20 birds. Hopkins & Coxon (1979) give their status on North Uist as "scarce". Ruttledge & Ogilvie (1979) reported the island deserted as a regular haunt, although there were 90 on Kirkibost Island as recently as January 1981. No regularly wintering flock has been seen more recently. Campbell (1947) examined three stomachs of white-fronts shot on the island in November, January and February 1937-1939: "two were full of the bulbils of *Scirpus caespitosus* [Deer-grass *Trichophorum cespitosum*] and one full of stems, roots and a few leaves of clover *Trifolium repens*."

Birds are seen regularly at Balranald on passage; in 1981, passage began during the second half of April and ended on 4 May with the greatest count of 90 on 27 April. However, there were no autumn records during the winter (1981/82). During mid-April 1982, up to 80 were again seen on passage (K.Fairclough to WAJC).

3. BENBECULA Nunton/Griminish (NF75)

Atkinson-Willes (1963) records between 50 and 120 on the island, while Ruttledge & Ogilvie (1979) give a regular but declining total of 25-50 geese in the Nunton area. No specific mention is made of Greenland White-fronted Geese on Benbecula by Harvie-Brown & Buckley (1888), Berry (1939) or Baxter & Rintoul (1953) and it is possible that birds may have moved from nearby North Uist more recently (see above). Recent searches suggest that the island may not be regularly used by Greenland Whitefronts in some recent seasons, but 41 were present at Nunton on 2 January 1988. Local opinion suggests that these may be part of the same group which frequents the Ardivachair/Loch Bee/Gerinish area of South Uist (see below).

In some years, spectacular passage of geese through Benbecula has been witnessed in spring, but the relationship of these to birds actually overwintering in the area remains unknown.

4. SOUTH UIST

a) Ardivachair/Loch Bee/Gerinish (NF74)

Gray (1871) records Whitefronts as rare in the Outer Hebrides and until about 1888 the species was evidently uncommon in South Uist. There does seem to have been a marked increase in numbers wintering since that time: "they have increased enormously in South Uist, the first three years I was here (1883-1887) they were very rare, and in a few years came in thousands" (Berry 1939 implying a quote from Harvie-Brown & Buckley (1888), although this does not appear in the original). These birds arrived in

mid-October and stayed until April, departing to the north-east. Although this information is repeated in Berry (1939) and Baxter & Rintoul (1953) these authors added no new information and one can only speculate if these thousands were an accurate assessment of numbers in the late 1880s. If this was indeed the case, there must have been an equally massive decline in recent times.

Atkinson-Willes (1963) recorded South Uist holding the largest numbers of Whitefronts in the Outer Hebrides, "where, despite a decline during the 1950s, up to 250 could still be found on the machair lands on the west coast". Hopkins & Coxon (1979) refer to "scattered flocks totalling about 250 on the west coast of South Uist". However, this information (probably from Atkinson-Willes 1963) seems to overestimate the present wintering population of the island, which since 1978 is thought to have been closer to 100 (including both Loch Bee and Loch Hallan flocks; C.Spray in litt). There were 120 at Loch Bee on 17 January 1982 and 6 January 1983, but there have been less than 40 geese present during the three winters up to 1987/88, when between 37 and 57 geese were recorded from the northern end of South Uist. Ruttledge & Ogilvie (1979) consider that the decline from the early totals of c.250 has continued and more recent counts bear this out. Baxter & Rintoul (1953) record that Greenland White-fronts wintering on the Outer Hebrides feed on peat bogs rather than the machair, so it may be that the decline has been exaggerated by a tendency to overestimate the numbers feeding in the peatlands in the east side of the island in the past. Unfortunately, there is no historical information on the use of specific feeding and roosting areas on the island to support this.

b) Loch Hallan/Kilpheder (NF71)

There is no historical information on the use of this site, but a general account of the past history on South Uist is given in the previous section.

During spring 1981, there appeared some movement between this flock and the Loch Bee complex, since birds have regularly been seen flying down the western side of South Uist and in some recent winters, the sum total of the numbers in the north of South Uist and the Loch Hallan/Kilpheder area has remained constant throughout. However, the experience of Tim Dix, Bill Neill and Willie MacLauchlin (keeper at the South Uist Estate and keen goose observer since 1975) is that birds never move between the resorts except during obvious migration movements. They define the southern limit of the Loch Bee group as Loch Stilligarry, whilst the Loch Hallan birds have never been seen north of Loch na Liana Moire at Frobost. In 1987/88, there was a maximum of 46 in the southern wintering area on 14 December.

Loch Hallan and adjacent machair are SSSI. The entire area (500 ha) is cited by Scott (1980, site 10) as an internationally important wetland site, with 100-200 Greenland White-fronted Geese present, which seems an overestimate.

Discussion

Recent years have seen a recovery in the numbers of Greenland White-fronted Geese wintering in Britain and Ireland. Regular census counts since spring 1983 have shown the world population increase from 16,541 to 23,274 in spring 1987, a fact due very largely to protective legislation throughout the wintering grounds (Norriss & Wilson 1987, GWGS 1988). It is therefore very alarming to witness the continued decline of the small flocks of Whitefronts throughout the north of Scotland away from the major haunts

of Islay, Coll, Tiree, Stranraer and Kintyre where most of the expansion has occurred.

On the Outer Hebrides, the reasons for the continued decline remain obscure. There is no clear loss of habitat through drainage and improvement, and disturbance levels on the croftlands and machair do not seem to have changed in recent years. The Greenland Whitefront does not conflict with agriculture on the Outer Hebrides, although there may be some confusion with Greylags in some areas where both species are present. Shooting has clearly had considerable impact in the past, both by direct mortality and indirect disturbance at favoured feeding and roosting sites. Regrettably, with falling flock size, even minimal shooting now has proportionally greater effect, so that whilst this may have declined in recent years, the very fact that poaching still occurs may greatly endanger these small flocks.

The decline of an islands total from perhaps as many as 500 Greenland White-fronted Geese in the 1950s (150 North Uist, 150 Benbecula, 250 South Uist, 50 on Lewis) to a maximum of 85 in winter 1987/88 (67 South Uist, 18 Lewis) clearly gives great cause for concern in the light of the general increase in the numbers of the race wintering in Britain and Ireland. It will be a sad loss to lose this peculiarly Celtic bird from our north-westernmost shores.

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