

Greylag Geese at Loch Druidibeg

In 1968, on behalf of the Nature Conservancy, I began to study the Greylag Geese nesting on the National Nature Reserve at Loch Druidibeg, South Uist, Outer Hebrides. The intention was to assess their numbers and breeding success, and the damage they cause to agricultural crops, in the hope that the information gained might help to plan an appropriate management policy for these birds.

The Outer Hebrides are one of the last strongholds of the indigenous non-migratory Greylag in Britain. The birds nest mostly among tall heather growing on the islets of remote moorland lochs, and flight chiefly to farmland to feed. Their main centre in the Hebrides has long been at Loch Druidibeg, which is one of the largest lochs on the islands and provides an abundance of suitable nesting islets. Soon after the young hatch, however, they are taken by their parents to two neighbouring lochs, a'Machair and Stilligarry, with better grazing nearby. In 1958, these three lochs became a National Nature Reserve, managed jointly by the Estate Owners and the Nature Conservancy.

In 1968, 71 nests were found in three square miles of the reserve. All these nests were on the loch islets, and some were only 3-4 yards apart. Most clutches contained 5 eggs, and the range was 3-7. Only 38 clutches hatched successfully; three were deserted and the remaining 30 were lost to predators. Crows were proven culprits, and Great Black-backed Gulls and otters were also suspected. There was no evidence of mortality among goslings, in that there was no significant decline in the number of broods seen on the water, nor in the mean brood-size, from the time of hatching until the young were on the wing. One hundred goslings were marked with numbered wing-tags on hatching, and three have since been recovered during organised wildfowl shoots. Together with previous ringing recoveries on the islands they confirm that the birds are resident in the area throughout the year.

Large numbers of non-breeding Greylag also assemble to moult on Loch Druidibeg, and in this year a maximum count of about 300 individuals was obtained. Probably these birds had come from the whole of the islands, for no other large flocks were seen elsewhere at this time.

In the ten years since the reserve was created, the number of geese breeding there has probably almost doubled, though earlier counts are much less reliable. The establishment of the reserve has also brought an increased sympathy for the geese among the islanders, as a result of which the birds are now allowed to breed successfully on at least ten other lochs in the area from which they were formerly absent or present only in occasional years. At the same time the birds have withdrawn from three of the more remote hill lochs, with poor grazing, to which they had presumably been driven in the past by persecution.

The islanders still complain because the geese eat their corn which, following local tradition, is grown in unfenced plots down to the water's edge. Both the stems and heads of the corn are eaten; and this delays the harvest and lessens the yield of grain. The geese are reluctant to fly into standing corn, but walk into the corn plots from the water or from the surrounding grassland. Further, for much of the time the damage is being done, the birds are unable to fly. I therefore tried to protect the crops with fences. These were wholly effective, but the damage was anyway slight in this year, with less than 1% of the corn in unfenced plots grazed. After harvest, the geese also attack the stooks and pull out the seed-heads. By this time, the birds are on the wing and crops over the entire islands are liable to damage. No attempt has been made to assess or prevent this damage, but this also seems to have been negligible in this year, for the weather was good and the stooks were out for only a short time.

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