

## A Visitor Survey at Slimbridge

It has become a truism that conservation can only succeed when firmly backed by an interested and enlightened public. One of the most effective methods of convincing people that wildfowl are worth saving is to show them the birds, in all their fascinating variety. These should be living in pleasant surroundings bordering a natural wetland, to which wild migrants seasonally come and where resident wildfowl freely breed.

This has been the formula developed at Slimbridge since 1946. In our first fifteen years a million paying visitors had passed through the gates. It took only six more years to raise the second million, and over the last three years the average gate has been just over 200,000. None of these figures include visits by Trust Members, now numbering 9,000, many of whom come several times a year.

Certainly we can claim to have influenced large numbers of people. Moreover the income from gate charges had not only covered the cost of maintaining the grounds and feeding the birds, but had produced a useful surplus. This was used to support the 'non-profitable' activities of the Trust—research, conservation and education in the more academic sense. On both counts, therefore, it would be desirable to increase the numbers of visitors still further.

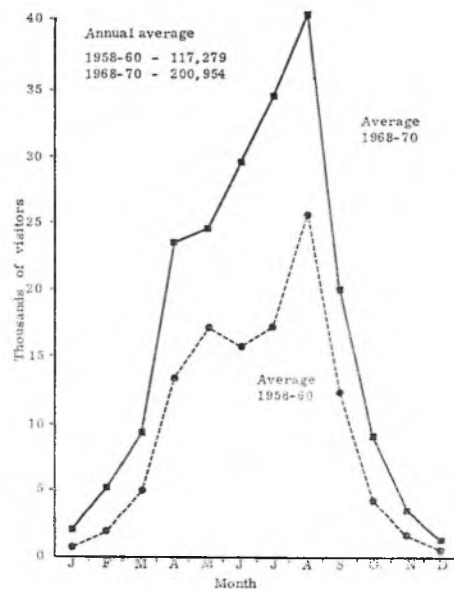
When this matter was last considered in this publication (*Eleventh Annual Report*, 1960, pp. 16-17), it was pointed out that most visitors came in August, when the birds were not looking their best, and that it would be desirable to spread the incidence of visitors through the year. Although the annual numbers have nearly doubled in the interval, the pattern of visits is still much the same (Figure 1). The average of three years has been used in each period so that influxes due to variable factors such as changeable religious festivals, royal visits or fine weather are smoothed out. The similarity between the two periods is further emphasised if visitor incidence is expressed in terms of percentage of the annual total (Table I).

It is clear that we still are not persuading the uncommitted masses of visitors

to come out in the winter half of the year, though getting 40,000 people into the country in those six months is no mean achievement. Nevertheless the people we want to convert to conservation will only be available to us in the summer. The grounds at the peak season are already overcrowded and to squeeze more into the 40 acres would destroy much of the effect we wish to create.

Faced with this dilemma the Trust Council decided that the answer would be to set up more Slimbridges. These would have to be as big or bigger than the present grounds, for experience at our other branch, Peakirk, had shown this to be too small to do more than just cover its upkeep, if that. Laying out and stocking such large areas would be a costly undertaking; mistakes could not be afforded. Moreover, there have in recent years grown up a number of 'wildlife parks', of varying calibre, which would compete with us for visitors.

Therefore it was only wise to examine in detail the successful features—and the shortcomings—of Slimbridge; to find out the type of people who were attracted, where they came from and what they



**Table I.** Percentage of visitors coming to Slimbridge in different months, for two periods ten years apart.

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1958-60	0.8	1.9	4.3	11.4	14.8	13.7	14.8	21.9	10.6	3.7	1.5	0.6
1968-70	1.2	2.5	4.7	11.7	12.4	14.7	15.5	20.3	10.0	4.5	1.8	0.7

wanted or expected. In the vulgar parlance some 'market research' was required. To have this done professionally is expensive, so it was fortunate that we were able to interest two other bodies in sponsoring a study. The British Travel Association (now the British Tourist Authority) was particularly concerned with those attractions, such as Slimbridge, which lie within reach of important tourist areas. The Countryside Commission wished to ascertain whether the characteristics, activities and opinions of visitors to wildlife parks differed from those of visitors to historic houses. Further, a survey afforded an additional opportunity to test the recreation survey methods developed in previous studies.

The *Slimbridge Visitor Survey—1969*, a booklet of 44 pages, has now (1971) been published by the Countryside Commission, Cambridge Gate, Regent's Park, London, N.W.1, from whom it is available free. The full results, in the form of computer sheet tabulations, are held by the British Tourist Authority and the Countryside Commission, and can be examined on request. It was felt, however, that a summary of the report should be made available in WILDFOWL since the matter is of considerable interest to Trust Members and to others concerned with forwarding conservation through attracting and educating the public. There follows a series of extracts from the *Survey*.

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### Methods used in the survey

#### Sample selection

Before the main survey, a small pilot study was carried out in May 1969, to test the wording and effectiveness of the questionnaire. In the main survey, interviewing was conducted on 12 days throughout the summer from June to September. Days were phased during the early, middle and late season, as well as on each day of the week.

The method used on both the pilot and the main survey was as follows: on each interviewing day, four interviewers and a supervisor were employed. Interviewers were stationed at various points where the public were likely to pass, and as far as possible in positions where information could be collected from respondents as they were completing rather than beginning their visit. Interviewers were instructed to interview the first person who passed them, and then the next person to pass after an interview had been com-

pleted, and so on until the required number of interviews had been obtained. No quotas in terms of sex, age or social class were set. Children under 15 years were excluded from the survey, as were organised school parties.

A total of 1,093 interviews was completed; the average number to an interviewer day was therefore 23. Table II sets out the number of visitors and the number interviewed on each date.

On each day that interviewing was carried out, details were also collected, in the car park, of the number of coach parties. For each coach, information was obtained on the point of departure, the length of stay at Slimbridge, the type of group in the coach party, the number of people in the coach and other places visited on the trip.

**Table II. Number of visitors to Slimbridge and number of interviews on each survey day, 1969.**

Date	Number of visitors	Number of interviews
Wednesday 11 June	534	86
Saturday 14 June	864	109
Sunday 6 July	881	98
Thursday 10 July	774	65
Monday 21 July	1176	86
Saturday 26 July	691	86
Sunday 3 August	1429	109
Friday 8 August	940	86
Sunday 31 August	2678	119
Tuesday 2 September	1471	86
Monday 8 September	704	98
Saturday 13 September	368	65
Total	12510	1093

### Main findings

#### What kinds of people visit Slimbridge?

Some 30% of visitors were aged 34 years or less. Compared with the national population, lower proportions of both the younger age groups (16-24) and the older (65 and over) were found among Slimbridge visitors, but those of early and late middle age were highly represented (Table III). Somewhat surprisingly, rather

**Table III. Age groups of visitors to Slimbridge.**

Ages	Slimbridge %	British Population %
16-24	11	18
25-34	18	16
35-44	22	16
45-54	21	17
55-64	18	16
65 and over	9	17

fewer than half the visitors (39%) were accompanied by children, 25% were with children under nine years; 20% were accompanied by children aged nine but under 15 years.

Slimbridge results show a proportion in the top two social groups (AB) far above that for the population as a whole (Table IV). There is a corresponding under-representation of the C2, and particularly the DE, groups.

**Table IV. Social class of visitors to Slimbridge.**

<i>Social Class</i>	<i>Slimbridge %</i>	<i>British Population %</i>
AB	36	12
C1	29	25
C2	27	30
DE	9	33

*How often do people visit Slimbridge? Do they plan their trip in advance?*

Although nearly three-quarters (74%) of the interviewed visitors were on their first visit to Slimbridge, 14% had already been once and 12% had been two or more times before. Predictably, these repeat visits were made by people who had travelled less far than those on their first trip; 17% of the visitors who had come from within 30 miles (48 km.) were on their third or subsequent visit, compared with 8% of those who had travelled from more than 75 miles (120 km.) away. There appear to be no significant differences between age groups or social classes in the frequency of visits made to Slimbridge.

Only 6% of the visitors to Slimbridge could be described as 'casual', in that they decided to stop after seeing road signs directing motorists to the Wildfowl Trust. This is probably due to the scarcity of such signs. The proportion of visitors who had done some prior planning of their trip (94%) is higher than the proportions found for historic houses.

*What reasons do people give for visiting a wildlife area?*

All visitors who had planned their trip in advance were asked to give their reasons 'for coming here today'. The question asked was open-ended, and respondents were not prompted. 30% recorded an interest in birds, but if this figure is combined with other answers relating specifically to wildlife, the proportion rises to 50%, and this interest is found in all age groups and among all social classes. Even so, many people gave reasons related

rather more to the attractions of Slimbridge as a pleasant location for a day out; at least 48% were in this category. 20% of the visitors gave no other reason than that they were bringing friends or relatives. Again, the general reasons, as well as the specific ones, were spread among all social classes and all age groups. Even for members of the Wildfowl Trust there was an equal spread of specific and more general reasons (43% and 45%).

The persistence of the general attractions of Slimbridge for a day out, rather than as a focus for a specific interest in wildlife, is shown by a comparison of the views of people on their first visit with those on their second or subsequent trip. More specific than general reasons were given among first-time visitors, while among those on their second or subsequent visit, general reasons were more often quoted. It seems therefore that, perhaps surprisingly, the pleasant surroundings of Slimbridge are an important factor besides the birds themselves in attracting people for a second visit. Also it is apparent that visitors wish to show the attractions of Slimbridge to other people. (33% of repeat visitors said they had come to 'bring others', compared with 15% of those on their first visit.)

*How do people travel to Slimbridge? How far do they come?*

Many studies of outdoor recreation areas have confirmed that the overwhelming majority of visitors arrive by car. At Slimbridge the proportion was 82%. 14% of the visitors to Slimbridge came by coach, and the survey shows that these people were, in general, more likely to be in the lower social class groups and older age categories. Coach travellers also tended to travel further; they were almost equally divided between those in an organised party (for example an amenity society) and those on an advertised tour (such as an excursion from a holiday centre). Weekdays seemed to be more popular than Sundays for coach trips of both kinds, and especially organised outings, and it must be remembered that these are a useful means of spreading the load of visitors from weekends to the relatively slack mid-week periods. Only 2% arrived by public transport.

The survey showed that, of those people who had travelled from home on the day of interview, the majority (57%) had come more than 50 miles (80 km.). The average (one-way) journey for all



Plate XIII. (a) A male North American Ruddy Duck *Oxyura j. jamaicensis* in the 'bubbling' phase of its remarkable display. (b) A pair of Australian Grey Teal *Anas gibberifrons gracilis*, one showing the wing-stretch comfort movement.

Philippa Scott





*Philippa Scott*

Plate XIV. Catching Bewick's Swans at Slimbridge. (a) A party of birds is slowly driven up the 'pipe' into which they were decoyed by food. (b) Twenty swans quietly awaiting ringing, measuring and X-raying in the corral at the end of the pipe. From left to right: Shaft, Tahini, Brown, Pingola, Iliad, Coastguard, Beachcomber, Eccles, Nimble, Start, Furze, Partridge, Raquello, a cygnet of Ivy and Mistletoe, Caroline, Rabbit, Xantho, Frobe and Muzzy. Only one bird cannot be identified, having its bill hidden. (See pp. 140-143.)

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visitors was 58 miles (93 km.)—a distance some 20 to 30 miles (32 to 48 km.) further than the averages recorded for those travelling to historic houses. Indeed, the evidence is that between a fifth and a quarter of all visitors to Slimbridge must have made a round trip of more than 150 miles (240 km.).

When these figures are further analysed, by frequency of visit and mode of travel, it is apparent that those on their first visit were more likely to travel further than those on their second or subsequent visit; 63% of first-time visitors travelled over 50 miles (80 km.), compared with 42% of those on a repeat visit. Coach travellers were prepared to travel longer distances than those travelling by car; 74% came more than 50 miles (80 km.), compared with 54% of motorists. The survey also shows that holiday visitors were far less willing to travel long distances than day visitors. 90% of the visitors who had travelled over 75 miles (120 km.) to Slimbridge had come from home on the day they were interviewed, while only 10% of the people who had travelled that far were on holiday away from home. The average distance travelled by holiday-makers was 33 miles (53 km.), while that of day visitors was 58 miles (93 km.).

All the major towns round Slimbridge contributed day visitors: Bristol (10%), Gloucester (10%) and Cardiff (12%) were especially important; although many came from far afield, even London. The survey shows that visitors who had not come from home, most of whom were holidaymakers, were less widely drawn in terms of distance, but travelled from a variety of local holiday centres (53% from Gloucestershire and Bristol).

*What is the proportion of holidaymakers among visitors to Slimbridge?*

37% of the visitors had not come from home on the day of interview, including 3% who were visitors from abroad. Nearly nine out of ten of these visitors claimed to be 'on holiday away from home'; in other words 32% of *all* visitors to Slimbridge. A small proportion of visitors were *en route* from home to some other destination when they stopped at Slimbridge, so that the overall total of holidaymakers may have been 34%.

The proportion of visitors to Slimbridge who had both come from, and were returning to, home on the day of interview (that is 'day visitors' in the strict sense) was 61%.

The survey shows that there were relatively more day visitors on Sundays

than weekdays, when, although day visitors were in the majority, their proportion was lower.

There is also evidence to suggest that visitors from home travelled further than visitors coming from other destinations—mainly holiday centres. Predictably, day visitors were more likely to make repeat visits to Slimbridge than those on holiday; 76% of the visitors on their second or subsequent visit had come from home, compared with 61% of first-time visitors.

It is surprising that almost all coach travellers had come from home on the day of interview—only 10% had come from some other base, even though it might have been thought that many coach excursions would be operated for holiday makers.

It is interesting to note that the holiday-makers among the visitors to Slimbridge are drawn from a widely distributed area in which no individual place accounts for more than 8% (Bristol). This suggests that many of these holiday visitors are in fact touring the area generally.

*What do people do at Slimbridge? What are their reactions to the facilities offered?*

At least three-quarters of all visitors walked to both ends of the grounds, the Rushy Pen and the Acrow Tower. People who did not visit the Rushy Pen said that they were short of time (21% of those who did not go), too tired (18%) or could not find it (15%). The tower giving views over the duck decoy was rather less popular; nevertheless 41% had visited it. There being no wild geese on the Dumbles at this season, the Holden Tower and its covered approach were not open.

Over a third of all visitors claimed to

**Table V. Activities of visitors to Slimbridge.**

	All respondents %
Visited Rushy Pen	85
Climbed Acrow Tower	74
Climbed tower to see duck decoy	41
Visited tropical house	36
Fed birds	28
Looked at conservation exhibition	70
Looked at research exhibition	38
Visited shop	76
Picnicked in car park	20
Picnicked in grounds	12
Visited self-service restaurant	53
Visited waitress service restaurant	8
Bought guide-book	35
Used sound guide	1
Don't know/Not stated	1



have visited the tropical house, but this may well be an overestimate. An extra charge is made for this attraction, and estimates of visitors based on the number of tickets sold indicate a lower overall proportion; some respondents may have answered positively because they 'visited' the tropical house but did not go in (Table V).

Almost a third of all visitors fed the birds, and it is not surprising that in reply to a question asking if any additional facilities were wanted, a number of people (5% of all visitors) would have liked to be able to buy food for the birds. In general, however, few people wanted to see any changes at Slimbridge, and from the 34% who wanted more facilities, the most frequent suggestion was for toilets at the far end of the route (29%), that is, near the Acrow Tower. More shelter and seats in the grounds (21% and 12%) would also have been acceptable.

Visitors were asked about the two permanent exhibitions at Slimbridge: one on conservation, which is passed by everyone going through the entrance hall out to the grounds, and another on research by the Wildfowl Trust, for which a small detour from the main route must be made. The relative location of the exhibitions as well as their subject matter may be accountable for their differences in popularity; 70% of the visitors stopped to look at the conservation exhibition, but only 38% looked at the panels on research. Most of the people who visited the conservation exhibition found it interesting, and more than three-quarters of them thought it had succeeded in its object of making people more aware of the threats of mankind to wildlife. Only a quarter of the people had any suggestions for improvement, and they mentioned the need to make the exhibition larger, more prominent, and simpler—some suggested that this could be achieved by the use of models. Most people who looked at the research exhibition found it interesting, few having any suggestions to make, although again simplification and the need for a guide were mentioned.

The activities of people in the grounds may reflect a lack of information on the position of some features. For example, it might help if the sign on the return route guided visitors to the Rushy Pen and other places of interest. A plan of the grounds, showing the existence and position of the Rushy Pen, is given in the guide-book which costs 12½p; but this was bought by only 35% of respondents.

Although this proportion corresponds to a much higher proportion of groups as opposed to individuals (it is to be expected that only one guide-book is bought for each group) it is revealing that two-thirds of all visitors had not read the guide by the end of their visit! Most of those who had read it thought it was good, but it does seem to be kept as a souvenir rather than used for reference at the time of the visit. It may not even be read at home—two-thirds of all those on their second or subsequent visit had not read their copy. Therefore, even if a guide-book is bought, there is no guarantee that it will be read, and even the plan of Slimbridge may be little used for reference. There seems to be some advantage in having further map boards like the one placed at the entrance.

The need for more information is reflected in other findings of the survey. Visitors were asked for their reactions to the notices in the bird pens which give a written description of the species that can be seen. 30% of all visitors considered that the notices did not tell them enough about the birds, and of these people, three-quarters would have liked to see a sketch or photograph of each bird to help them identify the species. One-third wanted a fuller written description, and a further third wanted more information about the habits of birds. It is surprising that only 1% of the visitors hired the tape-recorder sound-guide, and it may be that, like the Rushy Pen, and the opportunities to picnic in the grounds, this facility is not sufficiently well advertised.

Many people visited the shop (76%) but only about half of these made purchases. This may well reflect the fairly high cost of many goods on sale, since half of those who visited the shop felt it was expensive. It is worth noting, however, that souvenir shops normally attract many browsers. A third of those who had visited the shop thought the goods were attractively displayed and the same proportion welcomed the variety; but 9% thought there were rather too few things suitable for children.

32% of visitors picnicked—most in the car park (20%) which is outside and less attractive than the main grounds of Slimbridge, where the rest (12%) picnicked.

A high proportion of visitors used the restaurant, which is divided into two parts: a self-service section, clearly the more popular (visited by 53%), and a waitress section (used by only 8%). 80% of those who had visited one or other

part found the restaurant satisfactory, and people commented on the overall quality (22%), good service (7%), appearance (6%) and view (3%), as well as the quality of the tea (4%)! Even so, 20% thought the restaurant rather too expensive, and the service and choice of food poor.

*How long do people spend at Slimbridge?*

The average length of stay for all visitors to Slimbridge is three hours. There were no differences in different age groups or social classes, but it does seem that those coach travellers on an advertised tour generally spent less time at Slimbridge than those in an organised party; of the coach travellers who stayed less than two hours, 56% were on an advertised tour compared with 31% in an organised party.

Surprisingly, weather seems to have little effect on length of stay. The survey results show no differences in the proportions of visitors who stayed less than one hour, or between one and two hours, on sunny, cloudy or rainy days. Only slight differences can be identified in the proportions who stayed longer on days when the weather was better.

*Do people visit other places on their trip?*

Respondents were asked what other places of interest (if any) they had visited on the day of interview. 22% mentioned other destinations, including 40% of the coach travellers but only 19% of the motorists. The most popular place was Berkeley Castle, some 6 miles (10 km.) from Slimbridge; this accounted for over half of those who had visited another place. The castle was very popular with coach travellers. 15% of those who had visited other attractions, and especially motorists (18% of them), went to the Severn Bridge. The only other important place was Tintern Abbey. For the visitors as a whole, more people tended to see other places on a Sunday than those arriving at Slimbridge during the week. Those who travelled further were rather more likely to combine visits to more than one attraction than those drawn locally.

*Are visitors satisfied with their visit to Slimbridge? What interests them most?*

Visitors were asked to give their reactions to Slimbridge in terms of whether or not the area matched their expectations. 51% said it was 'better than they had expected', 40% considered it the same, while 7% thought it fell somewhat

below their expectations. It might be inferred that weather at the time of visit would markedly affect the answers to this question, but a separate analysis showed that it had almost no effect at all. Even in rainy weather, 47% of the visitors thought their visit was 'better than they had expected'.

Those who found their expectations exceeded gave a variety of reasons for their satisfaction, but most were pleasantly surprised by the open character and extent of the grounds and by the variety of birds.

Flamingos are undoubtedly the most popular birds at Slimbridge (Table VI); 63% of all visitors mentioned these birds. There is perhaps a most important distinction between popularity and the ability to recall a fairly bizarre sight in the English countryside. Members of the Wildfowl Trust, however, expressed a more general interest in other birds, notably geese. The overriding interest in flamingos, compared with other species, applied both to those who had mentioned birds as a specific reason for their visit and to those who gave more general reasons. 19% mentioned the attraction of young birds; but much of the survey was conducted late in the breeding season and after it had ended, and probably the popularity of young birds would be higher in the spring.

**Table VI. Features that most interested visitors.**

Features	All respondents %
Flamingos	63
Young birds	19
Ducks	18
Black Swans	9
Other Swans	13
Geese	9
Tropical house	10
Open atmosphere	6
Gardens	5
Tame-ness of birds	4
Others	18
Don't know/Not stated	7

*Are the prices at Slimbridge acceptable?*

Visitors were asked to rate specific prices as 'too high, about right or too low'. In answer to this 84% considered the car parking charge to be 'about right'; indeed 5% thought it was too low. Nearly half thought the entrance fee for adults to the Slimbridge grounds was too high.

Visitors reacted even less favourably to the entrance fee for the tropical house. Of those with children, 64% (compared



with 55% of all visitors) considered the tropical house fee to be too high. 63% (compared with 58%) considered the child entrance fee to the grounds to be too high.

Reactions to prices varied not only with the presence or absence of children, but also with the overall distance people had travelled to get to Slimbridge. Visitors who had travelled further tended to react more favourably to prices than those who had come less far; 57% of those who had covered over 75 miles (120 km.) found the entrance charge for adults 'about right', compared with 46% of those who had travelled 30 miles (48 km.) or less. It may be that, after spending a fair amount on travel costs, the difference of 10-20 pence on an entrance fee is relatively unimportant; but that those who spend relatively little on travel costs are more sensitive to entrance charges.

On Mondays at Slimbridge, a cheaper entrance ticket is offered. However, only 12% of the visitors (interviewed on all days except Mondays) knew of such a ticket, and most of these were aware that the reduction applied on Monday. Even when Monday visitors were questioned on this, of those who had planned their visit for that day, only 11% knew that a cheap ticket was available. Again, this suggests a need for greater publicity for the 'cheaper entrance fee' if a policy of spreading the peak weekend load on to a relatively slack day is to be effective.

#### *Is advertising by Slimbridge effective?*

Respondents were shown a list of advertising media and asked to say in which of them, if any, they had seen advertisements for the Slimbridge Wildfowl Trust. A third of all visitors claimed to have seen no advertising at all, a proportion that corresponds to that observed for historic houses. Of the 68% who had seen advertisements, television was mentioned by most people (49%), especially those in the lower two social class groups. 61% of the C2DE groups recalled having seen television advertising, compared with 39% of the AB group. The dominance of television among the media recalled reflects the advertising policy followed.

Newspaper and magazine advertising

were recalled by 17% and 14% respectively. Guide-books were mentioned by only 5%; this compares unfavourably with the figure for historic houses.

In answer to a supplementary question, 37% of all visitors, and especially those in the younger age groups, replied that they had been recommended to visit Slimbridge by their friends. This was the case for 50% of those aged 15-24 years, compared with 34% of those aged 25-44.

Television and newspapers are undoubtedly effective media for advertising, especially for reaching visitors coming from home. Though the proportions of visitors who had seen television and Press advertisements are large, they are not as large as the proportions of the budget spent on these two media, which suggests that more attention could perhaps be paid to other forms of advertising.

Local Press and television are least effective in reaching visitors on holiday away from home, who are more likely to see coach tour notices, hotel notices and guide-books. The proportions of visitors who recalled seeing these kinds of advertisements, compared with the proportions spent on them, indicate a high return on investment.

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#### Conclusions

Many of the results of the survey only serve to confirm what we know already, but of course it is useful to have access to quantitative data when planning. Some of the information about the public and their motives may appear depressing; but, again, it is useful to know the size of the problem we are facing in our attempts to put across the conservation message. We shall not be failing if even a fraction of the summer visitors are impressed enough to become Members (membership also has nearly doubled in the last ten years), or to come again to see the wild birds in winter.

Suffice it to say that our Council and staff are bearing the results of the survey very much in mind when seeking to improve Slimbridge and in setting up new branches.

#### Summary

To provide a factual basis in planning improvements at Slimbridge and in developing similar sites elsewhere, a visitor-survey was undertaken in the summer of 1969. A thousand interviews provided data on the age groups, social class, reasons for visiting, distance travelled, proportion of holidaymakers amongst the visitors. Their activities at Slimbridge and their reactions to the various features were also investigated, as was the impact of advertising.

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