

HOW HILL, LUDHAM

By C. A. and M. R. Boardman

This ringing station is situated on the Norfolk Broads in the valley of the River Ant a few miles from the coast. A great many ducks use the Broads during the winter as resting grounds throughout the daytime and flight at dusk to feed on the neighbouring marshes. Thus it is especially favourably located for carrying out ringing operations.

The ringing of ducks was begun here in 1936, at which time very little such work was being undertaken, with the notable exception of Orierton Decoy in Pembroke. Since that date ringing has continued spasmodically up to the present time, and in fact has taken place during ten seasons only. None could be done during the war years, and in several others it could not be undertaken for one reason or another.

Since 1936 668 Mallard and 98 Teal (all wild birds) have been ringed. Of these 30 have been recovered on the continent of Europe and 161 in Great Britain (including Eire), making a total of 191 recoveries. It has taken a long time to get a recovery from behind the Iron Curtain, but a Teal ringed here in September 1951 was reported recently as having been recovered near Leningrad in October 1953. Sometimes there is a considerable time lag in the reporting of recoveries. For instance, a Mallard was ringed here in 1937, shot in Sweden in 1940, and reported in 1950! This delay may have been the responsibility of Hitler.

In addition to these recoveries several ducks ringed here have been recaptured in subsequent seasons.

The ducks are caught by gamekeeper Robert Smithson in traps he has made on their feeding grounds, and he also puts on the rings. It is not proposed to describe these traps in detail but there are three of them erected in shallow water. The best catches are usually made in frosty weather when ice can be broken and removed only near the traps which are baited with grain.

It has not been possible to do as much ringing as one would have liked, but what little has been done has been well worth the effort—in other words, the recoveries have been sufficiently numerous and interesting.

It has been found impracticable to begin ringing until the end of the shooting season and so most of it is done in the month of February. This seems to work out very well because it is at this time of year that ducks find it hardest to get sufficient food, and are therefore more easily enticed into traps than at other times of the year. Furthermore, what can be more beneficial to the duck population than to feed as many as possible near its breeding time especially during hard weather. In the great freeze-up of 1947 at least 200 Mallard were kept alive here on weed seeds and odd scraps. So hungry did they become that they used to flight to the food in the early afternoon in broad daylight and undoubtedly without this source of nourishment many would have starved to death.

The ringing has been confined to Mallard and Teal because although many other species occur here they are much less numerous and a great deal more difficult to catch.