

The Monitoring of Brent Goose Licences 2003-2004

A report to the Wildlife Management Branch of the European Wildlife Division Department for the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra), Rural Development Service (RDS), Cambridge.

Summary

Numbers of over-wintering Brent geese were much reduced in 2003-4 presumably due to poor breeding/recruitment. An unusually dry autumn caused early drilled crops, notably OSR to fail in some parts of the country. OSR is usually direct drilled into the previous year's stubble and as a result more fields than usual over-wintered as stubble or were re-drilled late with wheat that remained dormant for sufficiently long not to be attractive to Brent geese.

Where cereals were grown some farmers reported that the mild winter kept the crop growing and therefore grazing damage was reduced. Low rainfall reduced the risk of puddling and therefore crops that were targeted by Brent geese had a greater chance of recovery.

As a result of monitoring visits during 2003-4, recommendations have been made for changes to four licences in 2004-5. It is predicted that three licensees will have the numbers of geese licensed to be shot reduced and one will have a slight increase.

Introduction

The dark-bellied Brent goose (*Branta bernicla* L.), is a small, native species of goose over-wintering in coastal areas of Britain, most notably in the south and east of

England. The natural diet of the Brent goose is the inter-tidal vegetation, however, since the early 1970's increasingly large numbers of Brent geese have been feeding on winter crops, including grassland, on coastal farmland.

Brent geese have been protected in Britain since 1954 and are currently afforded legal protection at all times under Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Act allows for the issue of licences by Defra to take or kill Brent geese to prevent serious damage to crops. As a policy these licences are issued as an adjunct to scaring. The current licensing arrangement is operated by the National Wildlife Management Team within the Rural Development Service (RDS).

This report provides a summary of the Brent goose licences issued during the season 2003-4. The report varies from those written previously in that it is shorter, but also compares the data of the last three years, enabling any variations between the licence periods to be identified and discussed. It is intended that this report format will be used in the future with a more comprehensive report issued every three years.

Licence details

Table 1 gives the number of licences issued over the last three winter seasons. In 2003-4 85 licences were issued, all licenses expired on 31st March 2003 and

there were no applications for extensions beyond this date. Consultation with English Nature with regard to the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994 resulted in one licence re-issued to cover a smaller area.

The decrease in licenses since 2001-2 is partly due to an increase in the number of Essex farmers that have applied for the Wildfowl Pasture Supplement (WPS) between 2002-3 and 2003-4. This supplement is administered within the Essex Coast Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme and requires agreement holders to provide safe, undisturbed grazing for a range of species, including Brent geese, for which they receive a payment of £50 per hectare. Currently there are some 574 hectares in this agreement (pers.comm. A. Bullivant 2004).

Table 1. Comparison of licence details for seasons 2001-2 to 2003-4

	2001-2	2002-3	2003-4
Applications	-	95	85
Licences issued	96	93	84
Number of Brent geese licensed to be shot	2202	2217	1797
Number of Brent geese shot	677	808	481

Since 2002-3, Wildlife Management Advisers, undertaking monitoring visits, have encouraged licensees to agree to a reduction in the number of geese they can shoot based on the previous years' totals. This, combined with the reduction in the number of licences issued, explains the fall in the numbers of Brent geese licensed to be shot.

Licensees have agreed to a reduction in numbers of Brent geese they can shoot on the understanding that, should they need to shoot more to further reinforce scaring an additional licence can be applied for and issued. No additional licences were issued in 2003-4 but this was not a typical year as Brent goose numbers were lower than normal.

The number of Brent geese shot in 2003-4 is significantly reduced from previous years. This reflects the low numbers of Brent geese that overwintered in England in 2003-4, presumably due to a poor breeding/recruitment season. During the 2003-4 winter, where Brent geese occurred near WPS sites, some farmers found that early, persistent scaring conditioned the geese to use the WPS grassland and

thereby prevented grazing of crops. Other factors influencing the low number of Brent geese shot included the reduction of vulnerable crops in some coastal areas due to a dry early autumn which caused germination failure of oil seed rape (OSR) with insufficient time for some farmers to re-drill or undertake a very late second sowing. This resulted in additional fields of stubble available through the winter months or late sown wheat crops which were slow to germinate and therefore did not attract grazing geese. In addition, the Ministry of Defence, Foulness Island, withdrew their consent to shoot geese from two licensees, it is believed for safety reasons.

Crop damage

Table 2 presents licensees' perceived crop damage over the three year period.

Table 2. Percentage of licensees reporting damage

	2001-2	2002-3	2003-4
Licensees who reported Brent goose crop damage	52%	65%	48%
Damage by grazing	55%	23%	60%
Damage by grazing and puddling	21%	40%	32%
Other, including fouling	24%	37%	8%

In 2003-4 where wheat or barley had been sown, some licensees claimed that the comparatively mild winter resulted in grazed crops recovering well from grazing and therefore damage was less. Where cereals had been drilled late to replace lost OSR and germination was slow geese were not attracted to these crops. One farmer claimed to have sacrificed one field of OSR to keep geese off fields of winter wheat.

The comparatively low winter rainfall made damage by puddling less frequent and therefore reduced the areas of crop that were damaged beyond recovery.

Scaring methods

There was no significant change in the methods of scaring and their effectiveness as reported by licensees during 2003-4 monitoring visits. The majority of licensees report shooting to kill as the most effective way to scare geese, followed by shooting to scare and human presence, particularly if the latter was on a quad bike.

As reported in previous years other methods of scaring such as kites, audio/visual scarers, bangers and pyrotechnics (rockets) were given variable ratings as to their value in keeping geese off crops. Success appears to be linked with the time available to maintain, move and implement such scarers. The primary criticism of these devices is habituation.

Some licensees adjacent to WPS or nature reserves found that the reduced numbers of Brent geese enabled them to scare the birds onto these areas where there was sufficient food for them to stay, thereby minimising crop losses.

References

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Further information

For more information contact the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Wildlife Management Team at:

Address: Wildlife Administration Unit, Defra, Burghill Road, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol BS10 6NJ

Telephone: 0845 601 4523

Website: www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/vertebrates

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