

## ADVICE

### The status of greylag goose: a summary



This is a species with an interesting history in Britain which has potential implications for monitoring and conservation management. A summary of the history of the species and its current status is provided by Mitchell *et al.* (2012).

The greylag is Britain's only native breeding goose. Until recently, there were considered to be two resident breeding populations in Britain, a north-west Scotland (or 'native') population, which can be considered as a remnant of the once more common and widespread resident population, and a population resulting from releases by wildfowling from the 1930s to the 1960s. This second population is often regarded as 'non-native' or 'feral' because it is based on released birds though, in contrast to the Canada goose with which it often associates, it is more accurate to regard it as a re-establishment, comparable to other reintroductions such as the red kite. Birds have become re-established in this way in many areas including parts of Scotland and across wide areas of England and Wales. In England the greylag is now common and reasonably widespread in all areas apart from the south-west.

Both populations have increased rapidly in recent years and the greylag now breeds widely across the majority of Britain. There are numerous areas where mixing of birds from the two 'populations' has occurred. For this reason Mitchell *et al.* (2012) make a convincing argument that greylags breeding in Britain can no longer practically be regarded as two separate populations. They suggest that for the purposes of monitoring and conservation management, they should now be regarded as a single population.

The latest APEP assessment estimated the British breeding population at 46,000 pairs, with an estimated 140,000 individuals from this resident population present in winter. In addition, an estimated 85,000 birds from breeding grounds in Iceland are present in winter. Significant numbers of birds from this population formerly wintered as far south as northern England but these birds are now concentrated in northern Scotland, primarily in Orkney. The British resident population has increased steadily since the early 1970s. There are signs that it may have reached stability on sites counted regularly as part of WeBS (Holt *et al.* 2012) but the breeding population in the wider countryside continues to increase, as shown by the BTO's Waterways Breeding Bird Survey (WBBS)<sup>1</sup>.

In England the greylag has been shown to be a highly adaptable bird, colonising a wide range of wetland habitats, including many recently-created artificial sites such as gravel pits. It has a high reproductive potential and has shown a sustained increase in numbers and range over many decades. Brown & Grice (2005) suggested that the rate of recent population increase might have been slowed to some extent by a limit on the availability of further suitable habitat and an increase in the numbers killed by landowners and wildfowling. However, more recent data, including from the WBBS, suggests that the rate of increase remains high and further population increase and spread in England is anticipated.

British breeding greylags are neither migratory nor listed on Annex 1 of the Birds Directive and so no SPAs are classified for them. Holburn Lake and Moss SPA, and Lindisfarne SPA

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<sup>1</sup> [www.bto.org/birdtrends2010/wcrgrego.shtml#population](http://www.bto.org/birdtrends2010/wcrgrego.shtml#population)

both include aggregations of wintering Icelandic race greylags as part of the qualifying interest, although since classification the wintering range of this race has shifted to the north and few, if any, birds now use these sites. Martin Mere SSSI includes greylag as part of the special interest as a result of its aggregation of breeding birds.

## References

Brown, A. & Grice, P. 2005. *Birds in England*. Poyser, London.

Holt *et al.* 2012. *Waterbirds in the UK 2010/11: The Wetland Bird Survey*. BTO/RSPB/JNCC, Thetford.

Mitchell, C., Hearn, R. & Stroud, D. 2012. The merging of populations of greylag geese breeding in Britain. *British Birds* 105: 498-505.

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