

Mute Swan 1955-1956

Title

Mute Swan 1955-1956

Description and Summary of Results

Since the Second World War there had been some indications of an increase in the numbers of Mute Swans *Cygnus olor*, for example along the Thames, but these were largely based on the figures from a few swanherds. Reasons for this suggestion included: less taking of swans for food, especially by gypsies; better protection, especially by the police and RSPCA; more feeding by the public; and safer nesting sites in gravel pits away from the river. Hence a national census was attempted over the whole of Great Britain in the spring of 1955 and, partly because the coverage was not very good in some places, all or part of 18 counties in England, 3 in Wales and 5 in Scotland repeated the census in 1956. Overall coverage was rather patchy and it was thought that it might have been greater if more birdwatchers had been prepared to regard the Mute Swan as a bird and not an ornament.

The total number of nests found in England and Wales in 1955 was 2620. This was certainly incomplete and allowing for those missed, and by using the repeat for 1956 to help quantify these, the best estimate of the total was about 3400 pairs. The total of non-breeding birds in the areas censused in both years was about 3350 which led to an overall estimate of non-breeding birds of about 8250, although the total in Wales was certainly underestimated. In Scotland 463 nests (925 adults) and 2121 nonbreeders were recorded which led to an overall estimate of 3500-4000 birds. The total Great Britain estimate therefore was 14350-15250 in England and Wales and 3500-4000 in Scotland (17850-19250 in all).

The Fens and Broads of East Anglia, and the London area with a tongue extending up the Thames valley and into the Midlands as far as the meres of north Shropshire and Cheshire held the highest densities. The Midland network of canals also showed quite high figures as did several Midland cities, S Wiltshire and near Weston-super-Mare in Somerset. In Scotland highest numbers occurred in Orkney, the Uists and Benbecula but unfortunately the census only recorded a small fraction of the population in North Uist. The highest density of all was at the swannery at Abbotsbury (Dorset). Highland areas were sparsely occupied, and density in general decreased as altitude increased with very few recorded over 500 feet asl (160m).

The high proportion of non-breeding swans was a feature of the results. These were often found in quite large flocks ('herds').

A great deal of miscellaneous information was gathered. Much of it referred to mortality and nest loss, human and natural in origin, and to people's attitude to the species. 78 Nest Record cards were received over the two years, and details of nest sites showed that swans may nest near any water except deep lakes and reservoirs with bare banks, and fast flowing highland rivers and streams. The general habitat was equally varied: city parks and industrial effluent pools (if not too contaminated), to estuaries in Cornwall and Wales. But it is probable that large sheets of shallow water like the fleet at Abbotsbury and Slapton Ley

in Devon are ideal habitat, resembling the conditions under which large colonies are found outside the UK.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were asked to record (on postcards) all nests, non-breeding pairs and odd birds, with the National Grid Reference (if possible), name of locality, date of observation, brief description of site, habitat and fate of the nest if known. They were also asked to fill in Nest Record cards where the data justified it.

In 1955 wide publicity for the census of nests was organised by a press conference at the Nature Conservancy (unfortunately held during a newspaper strike!), a press hand-out, a special television programme early in April and follow-up items in several radio broadcasts. These resulted in around 3000 letters and postcards (and many photographs), referring to about 800 nests.

Most of the fieldwork was done from mid-April until mid-late May.

Purpose of Data Capture

To census the Mute Swan population of Great Britain, both nesting pairs and of non-breeding individuals.

Geographic Coverage

All of Great Britain.

Temporal Coverage

The breeding season of 1955 with a repeat in some areas in 1956.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry and supported by the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. Help was received from Her Majesty's Swankeeper (F T Turk), the Nature Conservancy, RSPCA, Thames Conservancy and Wildfowl Trust. Publicity was aided by the BBC (which allowed its address to be used for receipt of records following BBC publicity), and many newspapers, often primed by local organisers, carried notices or articles about the census.

The Royal Society provided a grant towards publishing *Bird Study* in 1958 which enabled full tabular details of the results of the Scottish part of this survey to be published rather than just deposited in the archives.

Organiser(s)

Bruce Campbell (England and Wales), C P Rawcliffe (Scotland)

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Publications

The main reports of the survey are:

Campbell, B. 1960. The Mute Swan census in England and Wales 1955-56. *Bird Study* 7: 208-223; and

Rawcliffe, C.P. 1958. The Scottish Mute Swan census 1955-56. *Bird Study* 5: 45-55.

The survey was noticed in all 4 issues of *Bird Study* in 1955 (vol.2) and 1956 (vol.3) and that for March 1957 (vol.4).

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 Folder containing a few letters etc. The whereabouts of the data cards are unknown.

Notes on Access and Use**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**

For England and Wales to arrive at an approximate estimate of the true population size, it was estimated by an experienced observer in Cheshire that the 1955 census missed about 25% of the breeding pairs and, while this figure was certainly variable between areas, it was

thought that it was a reasonable average. A comparison of counts in the same areas in both 1955 and 1956 suggested that the 1955 figures missed around 30%. Using this 25-30% correction onto the national figures counted arrives at the estimated total of 3000-3500 nests in England and Wales.

The totals of non-breeding birds were virtually the same for the areas under census in both years. Allowing for local movements and differences in cover by observers, it seemed safe to accept the 1955 total of about 8250 non-breeding birds.