

Annual meeting report

The status of the Greylag Goose *Anser anser* in Flanders, Belgium

Many attempts have been made to introduce artificial breeding populations of Greylag Geese into the Low Countries, generally in the hope of establishing feral populations. In the following account, data are presented on the current status of free-flying Greylag Geese in the northwestern part of Belgium, with emphasis on numbers, origin and phenology, as well as potential management conflicts caused by the presence of these geese.

Breeding populations

At least part of the current breeding populations originated from the birds introduced to the Zwin reserve (Knokke) in the mid 1950s (originally *A. a. rubrirostris*). After a few years the original feral group attracted wild birds on passage and became itself migratory. So this population gradually lost its racial characteristics through interbreeding with wild birds throughout the west European flyway. In the meantime, during the course of more than two decades, the hybridization caused the appearance of many heavy and red-billed individuals throughout western Europe.

More recently, settlement of small numbers of wild birds has occurred along the Dutch border in the northern part of East Flanders (in the polders and brackish creeks near St. Laureins and Assende and in the Maas valley (Kessenich, Stokkem, Gestingen, province of Limburg). Some of these populations remain in the breeding areas during moult (especially at Zwin and Assenede). At a few other places, escapes resulted in small local populations (Woumen, Bornem) where hybridization with tame geese has even been recorded.

Staging migratory birds

Passage of Greylags over Belgium is common from mid-September to mid-November, returning from late January to mid-April (mainly over western parts of the Flemish region).

However, there are very few sites used regularly during migration and hardly any birds are seen on the ground in autumn (when grassland is favoured). In spring, small flocks may remain for short periods in February-April, mainly in the coastal polder areas, with some along rivers.

Wintering numbers

The founding Zwin population has not attracted large wintering numbers (up to 800 geese), but there have been important increases along the Lower Scheldt river valley near Antwerp since winter 1993/94 (up to 3,500 birds). Here, the feeding grounds are the brackish tidal marshes on the Belgian side of the river opposite the Land van Saaftinge in the Netherlands. These are protected nature reserves, designated Ramsar sites and Special Protection Areas. Increasingly, many grey geese using the Saaftinge area as a nocturnal roost (including White-fronted and Bean Geese as well as Greylags) have flown out to Belgian feeding areas by day.

Conflicts with agriculture

Farmers have long been used to the presence of wintering Whitefronts and Pinkfeet in the polder areas north of Bruges, as well as flocks of Whitefronts and Bean Geese in the Lower Scheldt polder area and a few sites along the Dutch border (e.g. Assenede). However, the year-round presence of flocks of up to 250 Greylags has caused some concern and has led to complaints of damage in fields. This is supported by hunters who wish to gain a re-opening of the shooting season on this species in the region. At present, the only exception to the overall hunting ban on geese in Belgium is a temporary shoot in the Municipality of Knokke (in the Zwin area) in order to reduce farmers' complaints. However, this measure does not seem to have proved effective, because the lack of hunting interest has resulted in no significant kill, birds have remained relatively tame and have proved difficult to scare.

Conflicts with nature conservation

In recent years almost every small wetland nature reserve has a growing colony of Greylag Geese. Increased breeding numbers on some vulnerable small marshes can disturb important vegetation types and processes which

take priority in terms of nature conservation management. For this reason, nests are disturbed and eggs removed to reduce numbers in some critical localities. With increasing numbers, and long duration of stay after breeding, grazing pressure from moulting adults and family groups can cause serious overgrazing of rarer brackish or floating marsh vegetation types.

In conclusion, monitoring of the trends in numbers and breeding distribution of Greylag Geese in Flanders is needed in coming years for a number of reasons. It is important to understand the differences in behaviour between wild and feral birds and their influence on the development of moulting areas and migration patterns along the western European flyway.

Local conflicts with agriculture and nature conservation interests requires cautious management in order not to undermine the shooting ban on geese which has been enforced for over 15 years and which has resulted in such favourable conditions for wintering geese in Flanders.

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