



## Goose Watch 2008/09

As you may be aware Chichester Harbour is a key location for over-wintering Dark-bellied Brent Geese, (the Arctic Russia breeding race) holding approximately 5% of the population. It is also one of the species that Chichester Harbour is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Birds Directive and as a Ramsar site under the International Convention on Wetlands. The designated area only covers the harbour and some of the contiguous areas of coastal grazing marsh. However, Brent Geese also fly inland to graze on agricultural land and amenity grassland such as playing fields.

Monitoring of the Brent Goose population is well covered within the designated area, this project will seek to monitor the usage of inland fields by Brent Geese. Birds tend to start arriving in September, build up to a peak in December and January, with most birds gone by late March.

### Equipment

There is very little equipment you actually need to take part in 'Goose watch', apart from enthusiasm, suitable outdoor clothes and something to record your observations (notepad, clipboard, maps, recording sheets), a pair of binoculars would be very useful, a telescope and tripod would add to the experience, and some people like to use a tally counter or Dictaphone to aid counting, but this is not essential. Other useful items would be a bird book and a camera, though it might be difficult to get close enough for a good picture.

### Identification

Identifying Brent Geese is fairly straightforward, around Chichester Harbour there is only likely to be one species they can commonly be confused with, but a quick look with binoculars will quickly aid a positive identification. The Brent Goose is quite a small goose, that appears very dark particularly from a distance, with a contrasting white hind quarters. With a closer view, you will see they typically have a black head and neck with this colouring extending down into the front parts of the birds body, dark grey belly and flanks and thin white necklace (juvenile birds may lack this feature). Brent Geese fly in loose flocks around the harbour, but will adopt a line formation called a 'wavey' for long distance travel such as migration. Whilst grazing in fields they will form

quite tight groups, they make quite a lot of noise whilst feeding and in flight, with the call a distinctive cackling or 'rruk' sound.



Dark-bellied Brent Goose



Canada Goose

The Canada Goose, an introduced species is present in the Harbour in quite small numbers compared with Brent Geese, but tend to be present all through the year. They are a much bigger bird than the Brent Goose. The distinctive features are the large white chin strap, the black colouring on the neck stops where it meets the body, a light coloured front parts and a mottled grey flanks. Canada Geese may adopt the familiar V-formation, when flying any distance, but for short flights will fly in a loose flock. Their call is a loud and characteristic 'Honk'. Canada geese are an introduced feral species with a resident population of around 100 in the harbour. They are not a conservation concern, and therefore not a focus of this project.



Brent Geese on a grassland field

## ***Recording other species***

There are a number of other species of goose that may occur in the harbour area in small numbers (e.g. Barnacle, Black Brant, Red-breasted) and some of the wader species (Curlew, Lapwing, Golden Plover) will sometimes use inland fields. If you are confident of your identification, please do submit records of these species, but it is certainly not essential and Brent Geese are the priority.

## **Crops**

Brent Geese are a grazing species, whilst in the harbour they will graze the Seagrass beds and also eat the green algae that is widespread on the intertidal mud. When feeding inland, Brent Geese have a strong preference for certain crop types with cereal and improved grassland the preferred option, with oil seed rape and other types of grassland also used. Fields of stubble or bare ploughed earth will never be used. Of course agricultural land is managed on a rotation and a field that is suitable one year will not necessarily be suitable the next, this rotational suitability, adds increased importance to maintaining a long-term record of field usage.



Cereal crops such as winter wheat and barley will be used, by Brent Geese, cereals are grass species, the key difference this time of the year will be the uniform lines of the sown crop, with quite a lot of bare ground visible and the presence of tramlines, used for driving farm vehicles along to apply fertilizers and other agrochemicals.



Oil seed rape (OSR) is another crop commonly grown around the harbour, easy to identify in the spring with its vivid yellow flowers. As with the cereal crops, sown lines, tram lines and a lot of bare earth visible. OSR is a member of the cabbage family and has the characteristic blue/green leaves.

Improved grassland fields are also the preferred grazing areas for Brent Geese. Improved is an agricultural term meaning the field has either been reseeded with more productive grass species and/or received artificial



fertilisers. The result is a bright green colouration, the fields will also tend to be quite uniform and closely cropped.

## Counting instructions

When counting birds it is always a balance between getting close enough to easily count birds and avoiding disturbing them, not least because they will be easier to count while on the ground. But also because as a general rule we should always seek to observe animals without their behavior being influenced by our presence. Finding a viewing point where you have a background of vegetation e.g. woodland, hedgerow is always useful, equally if possible (and safe to do so) a car makes an excellent hide for counting flocks near to roads.

Accurately estimating the numbers of birds in a flock, can be quite a daunting task particularly if a flock numbers into the thousands, however, with the guidance below a reasonable estimate should be achievable. As long as counts are in the right ball park e.g. 27, 3-400, 1000, then that is perfectly adequate for these purposes.

Birds present in relatively small numbers or dispersed widely may be counted individually. The number of birds in large flocks is generally estimated by initially counting five or ten individuals, and then by counting the number of such groups comprising the flock. Very large flocks may be estimated by counting in groups of 50 or 100, or exceptionally, even 1,000 individuals. In these cases, allowance should be made for varying densities of birds in the flock, making the block size larger or smaller as appropriate. *(adapted from BTO survey guidance)*

## Training

It is hoped that this guidance will enable Goose Watchers to undertake the survey without a formal training session, of course if you need any advice I am on the end of the phone or e-mail. We will review the need for training at the end of the season and develop some training if required.

## Health and safety/legal considerations

Please find below some guidance adapted from BTO survey paperwork, relating to health and safety and other legal requirements. Much of it is common sense, some is not directly relevant to this survey, but, it make some valid points.

### **Volunteer responsibility.**

As a volunteer, you are under no obligation to participate or continue with a survey or scheme. Volunteers are responsible for their own health and safety and should not put themselves in a position that could place them, or others, in danger. You should never undertake any work if you have concerns about your own or others' health and safety. If you have any such concerns, you should stop the work and raise these with Chichester Harbour Conservancy (CHC) as survey organiser. You are under no obligation to visit a particular site, even if the organizers have requested it (although data collected from another site may not be usable).

### **Access permission**

It is envisaged that all of the surveying can be undertaken from publicly accessible points, such as roads and public rights of way. However, in exceptional circumstances please contact CHC for assistance in gaining access permission to access a particular areas. Always obtain permission from the relevant landowners or tenant to enter any private land before commencing fieldwork. Do not continue fieldwork if access permission is later revoked. A letter confirming your participation in CHC fieldwork can be provided on request. Please abide by The Countryside Code and Highways code as applicable

### **Risk assessment.**

Before undertaking any activities, every fieldworker should consider the particular health and safety hazards associated with their individual study sites and whether their individual circumstances and medical conditions expose them to particular hazards. Individuals should assess any potential risks arising from their fieldwork activities, which should include considering the risks specific to individual sites. You should think about what precautions should be taken against any risks. If you have any concerns, please raise these with CHC as local survey organiser.

### **Health and safety reporting.**

Fieldworkers should pass on health and safety information provided to them by the CHC to other people helping them with CHC-related activities. You are encouraged to report any particular health and safety issues about the survey methods or the survey sites to CHC as local survey organiser.

### **Mobile telephones.**

It is advisable to carry a mobile telephone, which may be useful in case of an emergency. Please note that mobile telephones may not work in some remote areas, and are only of any use if you are conscious and capable of operating them.

### **Working in remote areas.**

If going to a remote place, then always leave a note of your whereabouts with a responsible person. This should include: date and time of departure, method of travel to and around the site, proposed itinerary, expected time of leaving the site and return to base, and vehicle identification details. The person to whom these details are given should be told who to contact if you do not return and at what time to raise the alarm. If possible, do not work alone.

Coastal areas can be unpredictable and extreme environments, hypothermia is a significant hazard. In such situations, it is appropriate to wear footwear with good ankle support and to carry warm and waterproof clothing. Carry a map and compass and know how to use them. Carry a whistle and waterproof watch and. Avoid or abandon outdoor activities in bad weather.

### **Fieldwork at night or in the evening.**

It is not expected that fieldworkers will be undertaking work at night, however, in gloomy conditions be extra vigilant at night and wear something bright or reflective when walking on roads.

### **Livestock and agricultural machinery.**

Take special care when entering areas with livestock, especially cattle, rams and horses. Do not enter fields containing bulls and be especially cautious with farm dogs. Avoid undertaking fieldwork in close proximity to working agricultural machinery or forestry operations.

### **Parking.**

Take care to park sensibly, preferably off-road. Ensure that entrances are not blocked.

### **Terrain.**

Take special care when carrying out fieldwork along watercourses, cliff edges, or in areas that contain boggy ground, reedbeds or loose rocks. Wear bright-coloured clothing when carrying out fieldwork along busy roads. Do not cross potentially hazardous sites, such as quarries, ravines and railway lines and do not attempt to climb steep slopes, walls or fences. Please heed warning signs and do not enter land that has been deliberately obstructed by fencing or barbed wire.

### **Intertidal areas**

It is not anticipated that fieldworkers will be crossing intertidal areas, including open mudflats and saltmarshes, they are potentially very hazardous. You should be particularly careful if you need to go below the high water mark: check high tide times before commencing fieldwork and allow ample time to leave the intertidal area. Remember that tides can come in very quickly and that distances can be deceptive on wide, open tidal flats. Small tidal creeks or flows can rapidly deepen on an incoming tide, thus cutting off an apparently safe retreat.

### **Human confrontation.**

Consider your personal safety when conducting fieldwork within the vicinity of known or likely trouble spots. Avoid confrontation with landowners, land workers or members of the public. Consider the privacy of residents when performing early-morning survey work in residential areas. Carry some form of identification to confirm the activities you are undertaking. If you have any concerns about your personal safety, cease fieldwork immediately.

### **Diseases.**

Given the nature, scope and timing of this survey it is unlikely that much of the following advice is relevant, but worth noting for reference. Fieldworkers may be exposed to disease during survey work. If a disease is suspected, then it is important to inform your doctor that you may have been exposed to diseases associated with outdoor activities or the handling of birds (specifying nest visiting and ringing as appropriate). Typical diseases that may be encountered are:

**Tetanus** may result from the infection of even minor wounds and scratches with *Clostridium tetani*, a common microorganism in soil and one likely to be carried on talons and beaks.

**Weil's disease**, a severe form of leptospirosis that can be fatal if left untreated. The organism is carried by rats and excreted in their urine, and persists in water such as in puddles in rat-infested places. Thus visits to the nests of rat-eating species or places where rats might occur may pose a risk.

**Lyme disease**, a bacterial disease transmitted by animal ticks associated with rank vegetation, which leads to severe symptoms if left untreated. A variety of animals act as hosts for the bacteria, including sheep, deer and pheasants.

**Tick-borne Encephalitis**, a viral disease carried by animal ticks. Warm forested areas with heavy undergrowth give the greatest risk from ticks in late spring and summer. A vaccine is available where prolonged exposure in the risk areas is likely. In Britain & Ireland, a related virus responsible for 'Louping ill', a disease with symptoms varying from a mild flu-like illness to more severe disease requiring hospitalisation, can infect a wide variety of mammal and bird hosts, particularly grouse and hares in moorland regions.

**Salmonellosis** is a bacterial infection common in rats and mice (which may be found in the "larders" at raptor nests). The bacteria abound in the droppings of the infected bird, which may not necessarily appear sick. If the bacteria are ingested, for example as a result of preparing or eating food with contaminated hands, there is a risk of 'food poisoning'.

**Rabies**. risks from handling migratory bat species, otherwise currently unlikely.

**Avian Influenza**. risks from handling infected dead birds.

**Minimising the risk of such diseases requires straightforward actions. For example:**

- Immunisation against Tetanus and Poliomyelitis.
- Remove ticks from the skin as soon as possible: wear light-coloured clothing so that ticks are visible, tuck trouser bottoms into socks so that ticks cannot attach or climb up the leg, and make regular checks of skin and hair.
- Wear disposable plastic gloves at all times when cleaning out nest-boxes or handling any dead animals; dispose of them responsibly after use. Hands should be thoroughly cleaned after fieldwork (particularly after handling birds and soiled bird bags). Cigarettes can also transfer the infection from hands to mouth.
- During fieldwork, cuts and abrasions should be kept covered by a dressing.

**CHC insurance.**

The CHC has public liability insurance that covers all volunteers engaged in surveys on behalf of the CHC. Landowners may request evidence of this insurance and a letter confirming the cover can be provided on request.

**Under 18s.**

All volunteers must inform the CHC as local survey organiser if they are less than 18 years of age. Parents or guardians of the under-18 will then be asked to sign a 'Parental Consent Form' stating that they agree to their child undertaking the activities and have made them aware of the associated risks.