

Greylag Geese in the Faroe Islands

The Greylag Goose was once a common breeding bird in the Faroe Islands, although little information exists on its numbers as by 1800 the population was already very small, and by 1830 they had ceased breeding altogether.

However, they have slowly re-established themselves over the course of the past 65 years, and in particular in the past 20-25 years. In around 1940 a few pairs began to breed, but very rarely, and by 1981 the population had only increased to around 2 - 10 pairs. Very few of these Greylag Geese spent the winter in the Faroe Islands, and those that did were from a small population of semi-tame birds in Tórshavn. In most years, only during the spring and autumn were migrating Greylag Geese from the Iceland population observed, and then mainly in bad weather.

The real increase began in the late 1980s, by which time a few breeding pairs had become established at most suitable sites around the Faroe Islands. Since then, a steady increase has taken place and by 2005 there were thought to be about 250 pairs, although a comprehensive survey has not yet been carried out.

The number of Greylag Geese moulting in the Faroe Islands has increased more rapidly, suggesting that birds from elsewhere, probably Iceland, come to the Faroe Islands in order to moult. This is despite the fact that there are very few lakes in the Faroes, and today only two are used by moulting birds - Sandsvatn (81 ha), where fewer than 100 birds occur, and Toftavatn (51 ha). Greylag Geese began to breed at Toftavatn in about 1985, and by 1988 the breeding population had reached 10 pairs. Today, it is still only around 20-25 pairs due to hunting by humans. The first moulting geese, a flock of five, were observed there in 1988, and since then the moulting population has increased dramatically, with more than 1,200 counted there by Petur Mortensen in 2005 (Figure 2).

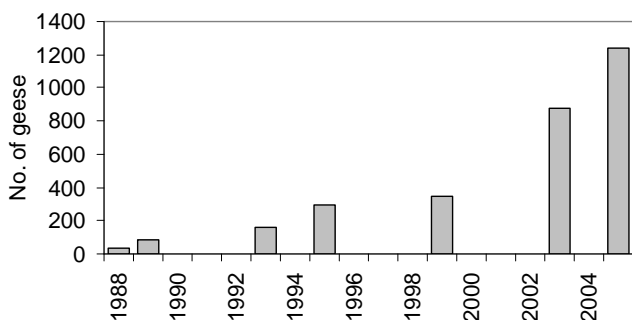
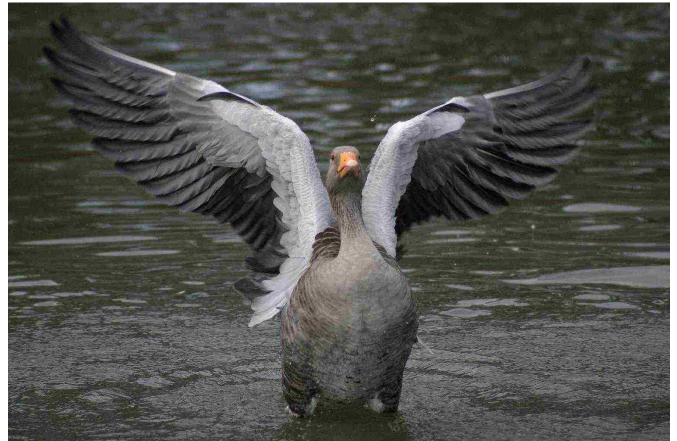


Figure 2. The number of Greylag Geese at Toftavatn, Eysturoy in June to August 1988-2005.

The most important wintering area is Sandsvatn, on Sandoy. The first four wintering Greylag Geese were observed there in 1975/76, with nine in the following winter, and around 330 by 2005/06. By this time the total wintering population in the Faroes was 500 to 1,000 birds.



Greylag Goose (Nicholas Cottrell)

In total, 111 Greylag Geese have been ringed in the Faroe Islands, most of which belong to the semi-tame population in Tórshavn. There have been two recoveries away from the Faroes, one in Scotland and one in Denmark, both of which were shot. One bird ringed in Iceland has also been observed in the Faroes.

Despite these increases in the breeding, moulting and wintering numbers of Greylag Geese, these birds are heavily persecuted in the Faroes, even though they are afforded, along with all other goose species, total protection against all forms of hunting, including adult birds, goslings and eggs. However, in reality there is little done to enforce this protection. A lot of geese are shot every year - some for food and others because the farmers believe that they eat grass provided for their livestock. Furthermore, many eggs and small goslings are taken for food, particularly for the Christmas period, and some farmers destroy nests and eggs, either directly or by pricking the eggs. This is the reason why the Faroese breeding population has taken so much time to increase – actually there should be a population of several thousand breeding pairs! With thanks to Hanna Joensen, Petur Mortensen and Bergur Olsen for their help with this work.

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