

XXXII. GOOSE SHOOTING AND PREVENTION OF DAMAGE

G. den Uil—T. Lebret—J. Philippona

Daily observations of goose shooting were made in an area of about 6000 ha of pastureland in the province of Zuid-Holland in the Netherlands. Goose shooting is allowed from 1 September to 31 January, but only from 30 minutes before sunrise to 1000 hrs. There were 14 hides in the area with 4 to 40 live decoys. During 40 shooting days between 15 December 1980 and 31 January 1981 observations were made near one third of the hides in rotation, from 830–1000 hrs. Occupation was 60% with an average of 3.3 shooters per occupied hide. 369 shooters were counted. During 30 hours of observation, 80 geese were observed to be shot, which is $80 : 30 = 2.67$ geese per hour. The length of the season is 40 days, which, at 1.5 hours per day, gives 60 hours. Hence per season per occupied hide $60 \times 2.67 = 160.2$ geese were shot on the average. As 60% of the 14 hides (8.4 hides) were occupied on average, the total annual bag of all occupied hides may have been $8.4 \times 160.2 =$ some 1344 geese. 274 more geese appeared wounded but continued flying. The average number of geese in the study area was 4200 of which 90% were *Anser albifrons* and 10% *A. fabalis*.

The geese in this area came from 3 roosts. In two other areas visited by geese from the same roosts 11 and 19 hides were seen.

Shooting as practised in this area of 6000 ha causes a lot of disturbance and a considerable proportion of the geese which might feed in the area are forced to feed elsewhere, with a high chance of using arable land. In the study area (pastures) the farmers are unanimous that the geese do not cause damage. On arable land there may be complaints and compensation payments. The conclusion is therefore that goose shooting, as practised in the study area, is leading to damage elsewhere rather than preventing damage and hence could better be stopped or at least greatly reduced.

The study focusses attention on the fact that goose shooting is generally practised with no positive relation to damage prevention and even adversely affects prevention by disturbing the geese where they cause no damage. A "Note on Goose Shooting" by the KNJV (Royal Netherlands Hunting Association) pleads for goose shooting to continue according to the general practice (morning flight shooting up to 1000 hours), be it with much self restraint and not on feeding grounds unless necessary for the prevention of damage. However, the latter advice is hardly respected anywhere.

Lebret & Philippona (in prep.) feel that if goose shooting is of any positive value for damage prevention, the general practice should be changed fundamentally as follows:

Rule 1. No shooting at geese at localities where they feed without causing damage.

Rule 2. Development of disturbing shooting tactics for places where damage by geese occurs.

Rule 2 has several implications:

- there should be an authority judging where damage occurs;
- there should be an organisation which could act with the requisite speed;
- disturbing shooting practices should be developed (see Appendix).

Generally speaking goose shooting cannot be a leisure sport where the initiative is on the side of the wildfowler. It should be an activity integrated in agriculture.

Of course, there should be a guarantee that fake "damage" is not used to evade Rule 1. Such and other possibilities of abuse are built into the proposed changes. On the other hand, present practices are far from satisfactory. The amounts of public money involved in indemnification of farmers are soaring (vide Table 1.). Their increase is not proportional with the increase in the number of geese but with changes in policy and with an increasing tendency for farmers to claim indemnification. A different approach to the damage problem is therefore urgently required.

A minor complication is that those wildfowlers who used to shoot in non damage areas might feel dispossessed by Rule 1. A transitional period of some 5 years in which the open season is shortened by 10 days per annum might mitigate this "loss" and give them time to integrate into damage prevention practices.

The possibilities of abuse might be reasonably small if state nature protection officials took part in the activities of the network judging whether certain fields were suffering damage. Another important factor might be the maintenance of goose feeding areas (especially by fertilizing), to distract the geese from crops susceptible to damage.

Table XXXII/1.

Sums (in guilders) paid for goose damage compensation in the Netherlands (data from the "Jachtfonds")

1955	—	1964	—	1972	5 063. —
1956	12 154. —	1965	—	1973	4 200. —
1957	676. —	1966	—	1974	6 220. —
1958	45. —	1967	277. —	1975	108 233. —
1959	—	1968	—	1976	350 200. —
1960	—	1969	—	1977	411 700. —
1961	—	1970	8 080. —	1978	218 637. —
1962	2 225. —	1971	7 125. —	1979	548 178. —
1963	—				

Appendix

Damage prevention teams may work as follows (adapted from Owen & Thomas 1975): Today's practice is to shoot at small units of geese as they come in on morning flight, so as to cause minimal disturbance, to have a maximum bag and an optimum chance of returning a second time. The proposed practice is to surround the field by shooters in hides. When the geese are coming in, shooting should not start until after the end of the flight, so that a maximum number of geese learns that the field is unsafe. A follow-up might consist of placing hides in the centre of the field, incidental shooting and of using bangers. Unemployed nature protection minded juveniles may be willing to do extra scaring work.

The proposed shooting system will lead to smaller bags and a relatively high use of cartridges. The costs of the latter might be subsidized by the farmers' organisations and/or public money. Anyway the proposed system should save a considerable amount of public funds and is therefore preferable.

Compensation was paid for the first time after the severe winter of 1956, but no compensation was paid after that of 1963. There appear to be two major changes in payment policy: 1970 was the beginning of a series of five years of payments between 4000 and 8000 guilders. Another change came in 1975 when the threshold of 100 000 guilders was passed. The severe winter of 1978/79 is remarkable with over 500 000 guilders. No correction for inflation has been applied in these figures.

The only goose species which may have affected the amount paid in compensation by an increase in numbers is *Branta bernicla*. However, the special *B. bernicla* farm on the Isle of Texel will pay off in the years to come.

Author's address:
G. den Uil
J. Philippona
Kasteel Broekhuizen
Post Bus 46
3956 ZR Leersum
Netherlands

T. Lebret
Populierenlaan 7.
4334 CE Middelburg
Netherlands

References

- Owen, M. - Thomas, G. (1975): Wildfowl and agriculture. - Advice on Wildfowl damage and how prevent it RSPB-Wildfowl Trust.