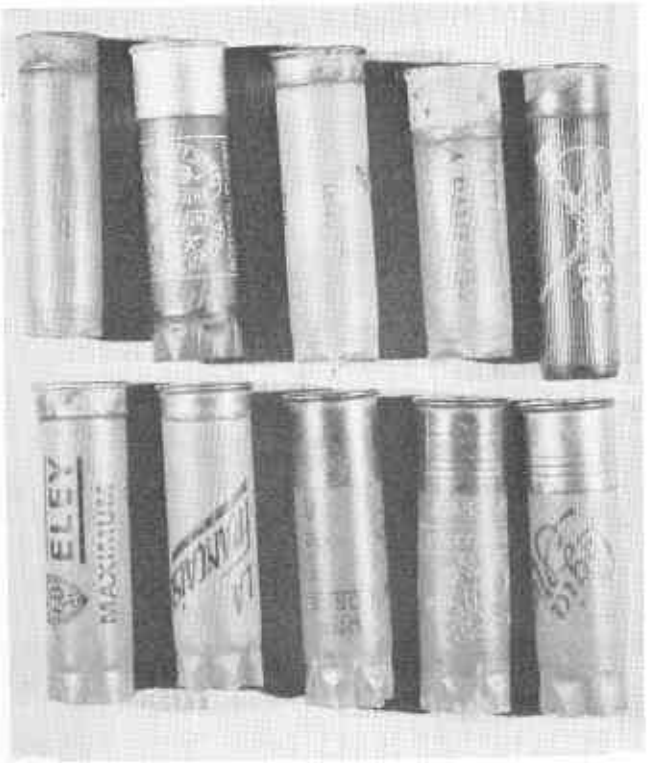
SHOOTING & WILDFOWL CONSERVATION IN IRELAND

In early April 1975 I attended the British Ornithologists' Union Annual Conference at Wexford, and I took the opportunity to see something of wildfowl conservation in Ireland. The wildfowl of the Arctic winter in Europe and Ireland receives a share of these, Greenland white-fronted geese, bernicle geese, whooper swans, wigeon, pintail and many other duck species, as well as large numbers of waders. All these birds find food and shelter on the shores, lakes and bogs (swamps) of Ireland, and have for many hundreds of years been the traditional quarry of the shooters.

Wexford, for example, lies on the estuary of a small river, the delta of which has been reclaimed within a sea wall after the manner of the Dutch polders. Two thousand acres of low-lying grassland were added to the coast in the 1850's and now the area is one of the main winter haunts of the Greenland white-fronted geese. Recently the Irish Government, through its Fisheries and Wildlife Service, acquired over 300 acres of this land as a reserve for the birds. Shooting is permitted from January to March on the rest of the land, called the North and South Slobs, depending on whether they are north or south of the river. The shooting is conducted by a private syndicate who work closely with the Fisheries and Wildlife Service and arrange only five shoots a year, siting their guns so that they shoot half the estuary each time. If the North Slobs are used on the first shot, the South Slobs are shot the second time. By regulating in this way a good bag is obtained but the birds are not deprived of a refuge and return in numbers each year, numbers which appear to fluctuate more in relation to the success of the Arctic breeding season than in relation to the shooting pressure at Wexford. Frequently a few individuals of other species accompany the birds to Wexford; a blue snow and a pair of graylags were there last April, grazing happily amongst five thousand white-fronts.

Wildfowl shooting at Wexford is well managed and shows, incidentally, that man-made habitats are not always deserts for wildfowl. Another area that I visited, the Shannon River and its tributaries, gave a different picture. The Shannon meanders slowly down from the Irish midlands to the western coast. Its tributaries, too, especially in their lower courses, are slow-flowing rivers

Little Brozna River, County Offaly.



Spent cartridges from various international shooting parties.

with wide floodplains giving acres of spongy flooded grassland ideal for wintering wildfowl. Recently aerial surveys by the Irish Fisheries and Wildlife Service have shown the ways wildfowl use different sections of these waterways. A small four-mile-long stretch of the Little Brozna River, flowing west into the Shannon from Co. Offaly, is the pick of them, regularly giving the highest counts of wintering wildfowl. Unfortunately a substantial part of this area is under the control of a private syndicate of farmers who have combined to lease the shooting to visiting sportsmen. So great is the attraction of this area to wildfowl that the excellent shooting draws hunters from as far afield as North America and continental Europe. The collection of spent cartridges shown in the photograph was picked up in ten minutes at one butt, and included brands from the U.S.A., Italy, West Germany, France, England and Ireland. Truly an international gathering. The shooting pressure is so intense during the hunting season that the birds must seldom get time to feed and rest. Hunters apparently come for a fortnight's 'sport' and expect to fill every moment with the crack and boom of their guns. They seek not only flighting ducks and geese, but walk the marshes for snipe and waterfowl, as well as beating pheasants and other dry land game. The disturbance to wildlife

caused by this invading horde must be enormous and the numbers of many species that winter there are declining. The shooting season is fixed by tradition and it may surprise many Western Australians to learn that its length does not take into account the success of the previous breeding season. Wildfowl can be so concentrated in frosty weather that they occupy only a fraction of their normal habitat, and yet be shot at in these concentration points if the season is open. Western Australian shooters should be grateful that our wildfowl biologists and administrators work together in controlling duck shooting pressure to the level that the population can take, and avoid the indiscriminate slaughter to which some Irish migratory wildfowl populations are subjected. At least Western Australia does not have to contend with the 'jet-set shooters' who visit Ireland in such numbers.

A happier note was struck for me on a visit to the Kilcoman Wildfowl Refuge. Here, in the southern midlands of Ireland, Mr. and Mrs. Ridgeway have bought an old bog farm of 120 acres and converted it to a delightful wildfowl refuge. The heart of the farm is a lake beside a bog of floating peat. At the edge of this lake the Ridgeways have built an observatory where water fowl can be watched through the year. The swans in the photograph are whoopers, feeding barely 10 feet from the window. The day after this photograph was taken they set off for their Icelandic breeding grounds.

Wild Whooper Swans at Kilcomen wildfowl refuge.

The Ridgeways not only bought the farm and preserved it but persuaded six of their neighbours to prevent shooting on their property, too, so that over seven hundred acres of protected land surrounds the bog. The results of this protection have been dramatic. From being the wintering ground of a few hundred ducks five or six years ago, winter counts now exceed four thousand birds, whooper swans, wigeon, pintail, mergansers, mallard, pochard and even a few Greenland white-fronted geese,

Mr. and Mrs. Ridgeway and Warden Keane, Irish Fisheries and Wildlife Service, examining a drain on the Little Brozna Plains.

a species that was formerly common there but disappeared in the face of persistent shooting. The Ridgeways are not just preserving the waterfowl but trying to learn something of what they eat during their winter stay, and what types of ground they choose for resting, so that the refuge can be managed to attract greater numbers of waterfowl. It has already been found that a few inches more or less water over the bog can make a difference to the duck numbers of many hundreds, and water control is one of the main management problems of the refuge.

Kilcoman Wildfowl Refuge is recognised by the Wildfowl Trust as an important link in the chain of such refuges that give shelter to Arctic wildfowl each year, but it is more than that. It is an example of the success that can be achieved by dedicated people working in a private capacity, with private means, and of the way a private individual's contribution can add to the conservation of an international wildfowl population.

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which are considered locally as pests report on the situation during the current quarter.

Information is particularly desired on rare and inconspicuous species such as Brush Wallaby (or kangaroo), Tammar, Quokka, Numbat or Banded Anteater, Rock Wallaby and smaller marsupials such as the Dunnart, if Honorary Wildlife Officers have an opportunity of observing them.

More detailed reports on any species, or criticism of any aspect of fauna conservation, would at all times be most appreciated.

Reports should be submitted as soon as possible after the quarters ending March 31, June 30, September 30 and December 31."

The Department of Fisheries and Wildlife has the job of trying to cope with the huge territorial expanses of Western Australia. The efficient eyes and ears of its Honorary Wildlife Officers are needed to help in the maintenance and protection of the native fauna and its habitat. Good quality reports from the field will help keep S.W.A.N.S. the most informative journal on wildlife in this State.