

A new wintering area of the Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* in Bulgaria

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It is known that the main wintering sites of the Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* in Bulgaria are situated in the surroundings of the lakes of Durankulak and Shabla and the reservoir Ovcharitsa (Fig. 1), where concentrations of more than a thousand individuals have been recorded. Small flocks and single individuals have also been recorded in northwestern Bulgaria, near lake Srebarna, near the lakes around the city of Burgas, in the Thracian Valley, in the suburban areas of Sofia, and along the valleys of the rivers Strouma and Mesta (Fig. 1).

A new site has now been discovered. From the end of November 1991 through February 1992 Lesser White-fronted Geese spent the winter in the fields of winter wheat near the village of Morava (35-40 km south of the city of Svishtov). The numbers were highest in December and February when more than 1000 geese were counted. The local hunters stated that the geese were ten times as many, but I am not able to confirm this, since in various parts of the fields flocks of White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons* spent the winter as well. Also in the winter of 1992/93 Lesser White-fronted Geese stayed at the same places again but the numbers were lower (reported by T. Natskov).

In the morning the Lesser White-fronted Geese used to fly in from the north, and in the evening they returned towards the north again. I suppose that they spent the night on the Danube River among the islands of Belene (4100 ha), Golyama Barzina, Malka Barzina, Milka, Belitsa (Shturcheto), Mataritza, Predela and Kondur. This group of islands spreads from the west to the east along a stretch of 5-6 km and is a comfortable place for the night rest, free of disturbance and danger. In the Belene island there are also marshes (Peschinsko (32 ha), Staro, Martvo and Duljova Bara), that can be used by the birds during the night hours, provided that the water level is not too low (depending on the water level of the Danube) and the water is not frozen. It is also likely that flocks of Lesser White-fronted Geese may have spent nights to the north of the Danube, on the Romanian lake Suhaia.

Although the Morava area was discovered as a

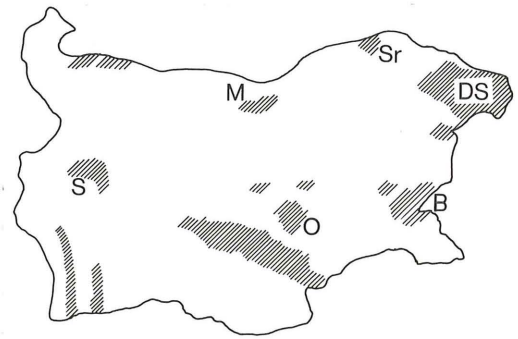


Fig. 1. Areas where Lesser White-fronted Geese *Anser erythropus* spend the winter in Bulgaria. S = Sofia, M = Morava, O = Ovcharitsa, Sr = Srebarna, DS = Durankulak and Shabla, B = Burgas.

Områden där fjällgäss övervintrar i Bulgarien.

site for the Lesser White-fronted Goose in the winter of 1991/92, I believe that it has been used earlier. This probably also include vast areas of winter wheat to the west and east of the village. A support for this assumption is the fact that hunters found several tens of poisoned Lesser White-fronted Geese in the winter of 1988/89 after spreading of poison against the Common Vole *Microtus arvalis* in the district of Pleven.

This new wintering area of Morava remained unknown among the experts because the Lesser White-fronted Geese are numerous only in December and February. In January, when the mid-winter counts of waterfowl and geese take place, the Lesser White-fronted Geese stay somewhere else. It is likely that they migrate to the flat country of southern Bulgaria and northern Greece, where it is known that this species spend the winter in some years (Handrionos & Goutner 1990).

It seems to me that the number of Lesser White-fronted Geese that spend the winter in Bulgaria is much greater than the numbers recorded up till now (Michev et al. 1983). The reason for the different estimates is not only the wrong seasonal timing of the earlier counts but also the method used. The counts should not be made only during the 10-15 days in January when the general waterfowl and geese counts are made. They must be made over the whole winter and they must start already in November or earlier. It is also important to count them not only at sunset or sunrise, as done in the present

censuses, because they have a different diurnal activity pattern.

When planning the counts of the Lesser White-fronted Geese, one important feature of behaviour must be considered. The main part of the birds fly to the sites where they spend the night later than other geese species (or together with the Red-breasted Geese *Branta ruficollis*), when it is already dark. Only skilled observers, knowing their calls well, are able to identify them.

In the morning the Lesser White-fronted Geese stay at the reservoirs until 9-10 hrs. Consequently, it is better to take the census of the Lesser White-fronted Geese in the morning at the night roosts.

To some extent this diurnal activity pattern of moving in the dark to the night roost and to fly to the feeding areas late in the morning, makes the Lesser White-fronted Goose (and also the Red-breasted Goose) less exposed to the mass killing by hunters during the winter stay. In the evening twilight the hunters mainly shoot White-fronted Geese since they are the first to fly from the feeding grounds to the night sites. Of course, some Lesser White-fronted Geese also join the flocks of White-fronted Geese and are thus exposed to the same hunting pressure.

References

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Sammanfattning

En ny övervintringsplats för fjällgås i Bulgarien
De främsta hittills kända övervintringsplatserna för

fjällgås i Bulgarien har varit kring sjöarna Durankulak-Shabla och reservoaren Ovcharits (Fig. 1). Det har rört sig om över 1000 exemplar. Mindre förekomster och enstaka fåglar har noterats på andra ställen (Fig. 1).

Vintern 1991/92 upptäcktes en ny lokal. Det var över 1000 fjällgäss som vistades på fält av höstveten nära byn Morava 35-40 km söder om Svishtov. Lokala jägare angav tiofalt högre siffror men dessa kunde inte bekräftas eftersom det också fanns flockar av bläsgäss i området. Även vintern 1992/93 fanns det fjällgäss i området fast i lägre antal. Övervintringslokalen kan ha funnits tidigare eftersom man vintern 1988/89 fann flera tiotal döda fjällgäss som hade förgiftats i samband med en bekämpning av åker-sorkar.

På kvällen flög fjällgässen norrut och återvände från samma håll på morgonen. Troligen övernattade de i ett område med öar i Donau eller i sjöar i Rumänien norr om Donau.

Anledningen till att man tidigare missat denna lokal är troligen att de ordinarie andfågel- och gås-räkningarna sker under en fjortondagarsperiod i januari. De högsta talen av fjällgås räknades nämligen i december och februari medan siffrorna var låga i januari, då gässen troligen flyttat till södra Bulgarien och norra Grekland. Slutsatsen är att bra uppskattningar av antalet fjällgäss måste göras genom räkningar hela vintern och att räkningarna måste börja redan i November.

En annan viktig faktor att ta hänsyn till vid räkning av fjällgässen är att de lämnar betesplatserna mycket sent på kvällen, när det är helt mörkt, senare än alla andra gäss utom rödhalsade gäss, med vilka de gör sällskap. De lämnar sedan övernattningsplatsen mycket sent på morgonen, inte förrän kl. 9-10, mycket senare än andra gäss. Denna dyngnsrytm är dock en fördel eftersom de på så sätt klarar sig undan den värsta jakten, som sker i skymningen då bläsgässen flyger till sina nattplatser.

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