

## RECENT CHANGES IN SIZE OF GOOSE POPULATIONS IN ITALY

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this report is to show the fluctuations in numbers of wintering geese in Italy and the recent growth of their populations. On the basis of ecology and behaviour of the geese suggestions are presented to protect these populations.

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### INTRODUCTION

Italy is situated along an important flyway for Greylag Geese *Anser anser* migrating from central Europe to their wintering grounds in Tunisia and Algeria. In addition the peninsula lies on the south-western border of the areas reached during cold winters by Bean Geese *Anser fabalis*, and White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons*.

In the past Italy had large numbers of wintering geese. Historical sources indicate that important areas must have been in the south of the country, some of them since many centuries (Fig. 1). The Greylag Goose became rare in the beginning of the 20th century. The number of the other two species declined in the next decades. By now the most important areas for geese in cold winters are in the northeastern part of the country.

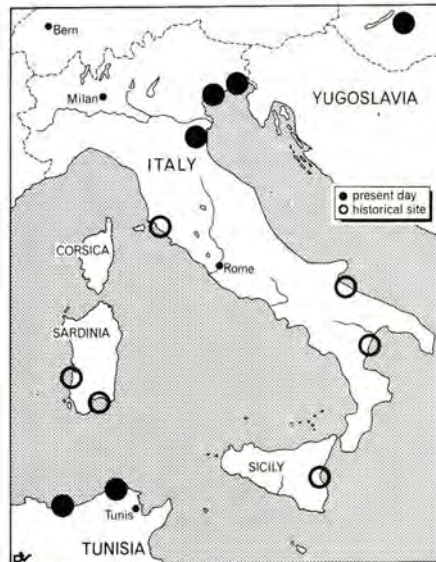


Fig. 1. Historical and present-day main wintering sites.

### OBSERVATIONS

Since the 1970s wintering geese established near the northern Adriatic coast. In some years the number of birds involved was quite high (Parodi & Perco 1980, Perco 1988, Boldreghini *et al.* 1988). Feeding and resting sites were close to lagoons (Fig. 2).

The main feeding areas are winter wheat and barley fields. This food source is available from the end of November, but sometimes later. At present, there are no grass areas in northern Italy suitable for geese to feed on, except at the edges of canals. The wetlands (about 100 000 ha within four lagoons and the Po Delta), have *Scirpus* grasslands which seem to be underused by the geese, due to disturbance. In the years with high numbers of geese (Table 1), flocks started to feed over a wide area, often far from the coast and the wetlands. From mid-January the flocks concentrated in the main wintering areas.

Bean and White-fronted Geese arrive in December and January, and can stay on the same sites until the beginning of March. The first Greylag Geese arrive in October. This species scatters in

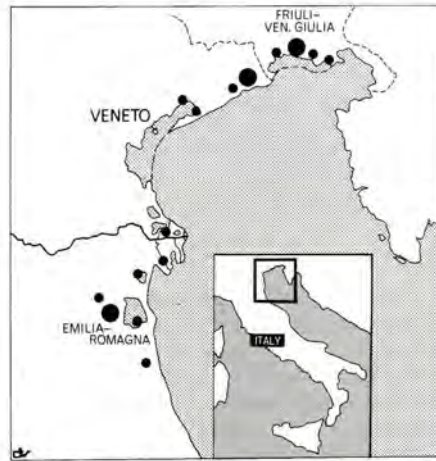


Fig. 2. Goose wintering areas along the coasts of upper Adriatic sea in Italy; main sites (large circles).

small groups over many sites. The location of the sites differs between years. Usually the goose flocks forage during the day and fly to the roosts at nearby lagoons after sunset. In some areas, however, especially when the disturbance level is high, flocks may forage during the night and rest in protected areas during the day.

Since 1984 attempts are made to reintroduce the Greylag Goose as a breeding bird in Italy. By now two flocks of about 50 birds each stay at "Valle Cavanata" in the province of Gorizia and at Marano lagunare in the province of Udine. Some of these birds reproduced successfully. More recently, similar flocks have been released in other provinces.

The presence of small numbers of Red-breasted Geese in winter has been recently established. Besides there were sightings of a few Barnacle Geese, one Brent Goose, and some Canada Geese.

Table 1. Peak numbers along the Adriatic coast in Italy.

years	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88
Greylag Goose										
A	10	100	-	25	10	110	200	105	370	-
B	30	300	5	20	50	20	250	100	40	-
C	-	100	25	20	5	50	210	250	500	30
total	40	500	30	65	65	180	660	455	910	30
Bean Goose										
A	250	1900	250	430	10	170	750	200	2750	50
B	300	2700	550	500	200	150	750	200	1500	200
C	500	2000	700	250	200	360	500	300	1300	60
total	1050	6600	1500	1180	410	680	2000	700	5550	310
White-fronted Goose										
A	50	500	20	70	-	60	750	280	2750	-
B	100	1500	50	70	40	30	750	200	2000	300
C	50	150	50	50	50	80	200	200	700	50
total	200	2150	120	190	90	170	1700	680	5450	350
sum										
totals	1290	9250	1650	1435	565	1030	4360	1835	11910	690

A: Friuli - Venezia Giulia; B: Veneto; C: Emilia - Romagna. Years: 79 = winter 1978-79.

## DISCUSSION

The shift of the wintering areas, especially those of Bean and White-fronted Geese, from southern Italy to the north might be explained by differing levels of disturbance. Shooting geese is prohibited in Italy, yet shooting is obviously the most serious factor and wintering flocks concentrate in a few sites. Shooting ban has less or no effect when hunting on other species is still allowed.

Whereas the Italian peninsula covers only some marginal parts of the winter quarters of Bean and White-fronted Geese, thousands of Greylag Geese pass Italy twice a year. Recent evidence shows that there are still suitable areas for a reasonable number of wintering Greylags. This developing habit may be promoted by the establishment of a network of refuges.

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## SAMENVATTING

Dit artikel geeft aan welke veranderingen er op lange (Fig. 1) en korte termijn (Tabel 1) zijn opgetreden in aantallen en gebieden van overwinterende ganzen in Italië, die thans vooral aan de noordkust van de Adriatische Zee liggen (Fig. 2). Besproken wordt verder op welke wijze de overwinterende populaties beschermd kunnen worden.