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Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
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WILDFOWL IN NIGERIA : THE 1966-67 CENSUS

C.H. Fry

West Africa provides the wintering quarters for large numbers of Palaearctic duck, not in the moister vegetation belts near the coast as one might imagine, but in the arid Sudan and Sahel savanna zones about 1000 Km north of the Guinea coast. Apart from brackish coastal lagoons there are very few natural waters within several hundred kilometres of the seaboard of West Africa, except for Senegal, Gambia and French Guinea. From here an irregular series of rivers, marshes and lakes reaches across the semi-arid region to Lake Chad. One of the richest areas of all is apparently the inundation zone of the Niger, between Timbuktoo and the upper reaches of the river 300 Km to the south-west. Nearer to Lake Chad, there is an extensive area of wetlands between latitudes 12° and 14° N., in the vicinity of the border between Nigeria and the Republic of Niger, consisting of numerous more-or-less isolated lakes situated in lightly wooded country which is rainless during the northern winter when it is visited by Palaearctic wildfowl, i.e. October to April.

In January, 1967, an attempt was made under the aegis of the Nigerian Ornithologists' Society and in conjunction with the I.W.R.B. Mid-winter Census to count wildfowl in some of these areas. The enormity of the task will be appreciated when it is realised that Nigeria is the size of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Italy, and that only a dozen ornithologists could be found to participate! The results tended to confirm what was already known about the abundance and distribution of wildfowl in the country, which may be summarised by regions as follows :

The Coast

European sea-duck do not occur as far south as the Gulf of Guinea; the coastal lagoons are apparently unsuitable for wildfowl in general except that the White-faced Duck Dendrocygna viduata which breeds at Keta and other coastal lagoons in Ghana move eastwards to the Lagos lagoons and marshes in the dry season (Sander, 1956, Nigerian Field 21 : 147-162). After 12 years residence at Lagos, the same author reported that White-faced Duck were the only common species on the Lagos marshes (nearly all of which have now been drained), and the Pygmy Goose Nettapus auritus and Hartlaub's Duck Pteronetta hartlaubii sparsely, while Garganey Arius querquedula were very rare. During the census a small flock of unidentified duck, probably White-faced Duck, was seen on a brackish creek near Lagos.

Southern Nigeria

Apart from temporary open waters found in the flood-plains of the larger rivers, natural lakes are very scarce indeed in the area south of the River Niger and its eastern tributary the Benue in Nigeria. In recent years a number of small reservoirs have been constructed, but counts at four reservoirs in the Western Region between Ibadan ($7^{\circ} 25' N.$) and Ogbomosho ($8^{\circ} 10' N.$) were all negative in respect of

wildfowl. Pygmy Geese have occurred irregularly at Ibadan, but there is only one record from the whole of the Eastern Region (Serle, 1957, Ibis 99 : 371-418). No counts were made during the census period in Eastern Region, where the only regularly-occurring duck is Hartlaub's Duck and other African species are rare, i.e. White-faced Duck, Knob-billed Goose Sarcidiornis melanotos and Spur-winged Goose Plectropterus gambensis (Serle, loc. cit.). Apart from Garganey, the only European duck recorded in southern Nigeria are single examples of Wigeon Anas penelope (Ibadan, 1935) and Ferruginous Duck Aythya nyroca (Lekki Lagoon, 1941) (Bannerman, 1951, Birds of Tropical West Africa, Vol. VIII).

The Great Rivers

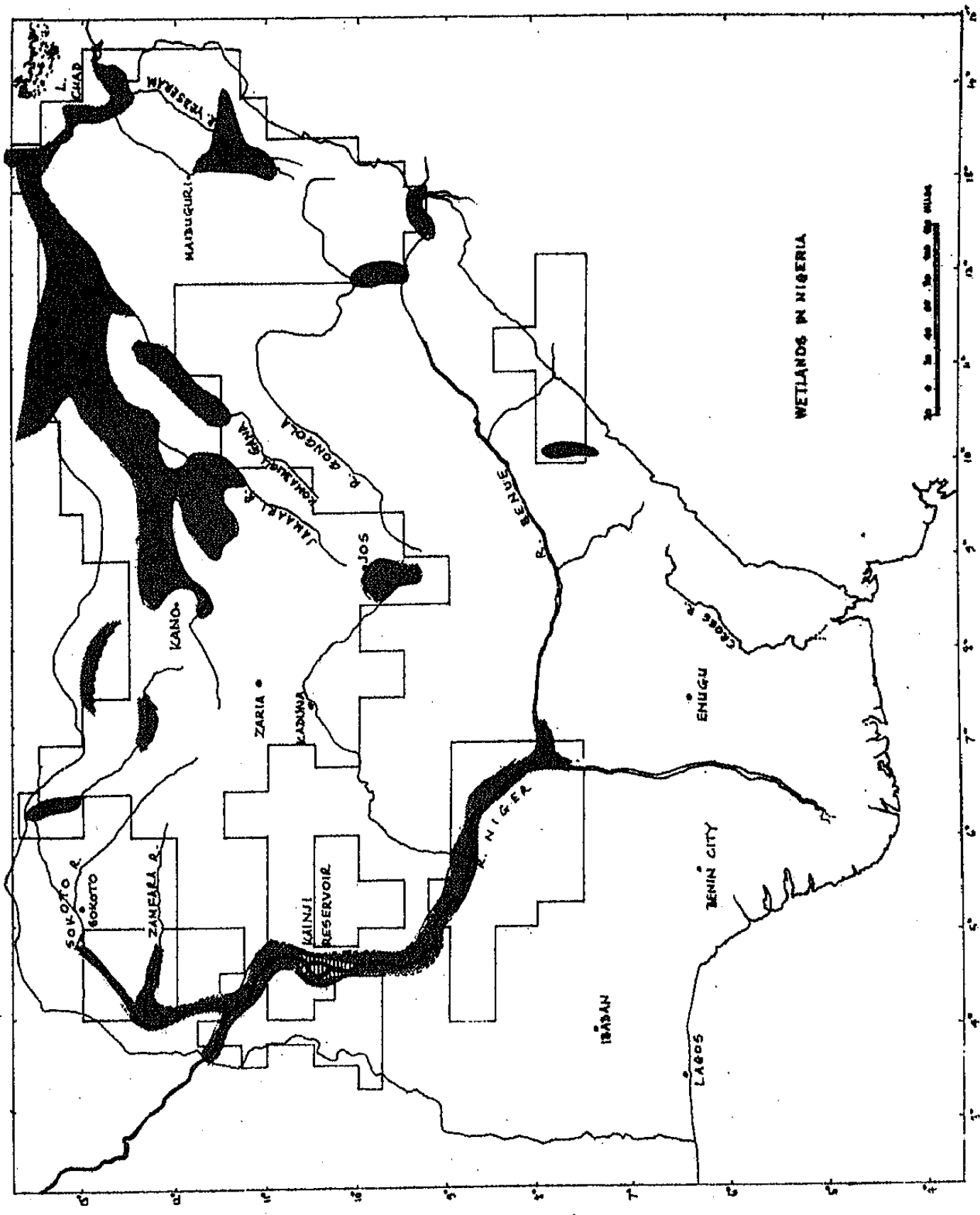
The Niger, and to a lesser extent the Benue and their tributaries the Sokoto, Kaduna and Gongola rivers, have wide flood-plains which are an important year-round habitat for such African wildfowl as Knob-billed Geese, Spur-winged Geese, Egyptian Geese Alopochen aegyptiacus and White-faced Duck. In particular, the Niger flood-plain includes a vast area of wetlands which are probably suitable for both open-water and grazing wildfowl, but have been little investigated ornithologically. For the 600 Km of the river between the Dahomey border and its confluence with the Benue, its flood plain varies between 8 and 20 Km in width, and only some 100 Km of the river south of $10^{\circ} 15' N$. are rocky and unsuitable for wildfowl.

Counts on the Niger, in the vicinity of Foge Island ($10^{\circ} 25' N$), the site of the great Niger Dam scheme, produced some numbers of African species, but no Palaearctic duck, which appear not to penetrate as far south as this on the Niger. Palaearctic geese do not occur at all in Africa.

The Kainji Dam, as it is called, is at an advanced state of construction and by 1968 a lake will be forming which will be eventually 120 Km long and 125000 hectares (480 sq. miles) in area. Although the lake will lie to the south of their main wintering area, northern ducks will doubtless be attracted to it; however whether the lake will provide a suitable feeding habitat for duck remains to be seen.

The River Yobe Drainage Basin

The River Hadejia is the longest of several tributaries which run roughly parallel in a north-easterly direction to form the River Yobe (or Komadugu Yobe), emptying into Lake Chad and draining a large part of N.E. Nigeria. Associated with these tributaries are numerous poorly drained areas which form lakes in the wet season (May to September), gradually drying during the ensuing dry season. About 400 lakes estimated from air photographs to be 400 hectares or more in extent in October lie in the area between Kano ($12^{\circ} 0' N$, $8^{\circ} 30' E$.) and Lake Chad. The greatest concentration of lakes is along the border of Nigeria with the Republic of Niger from $10^{\circ} 30' E$. to $12^{\circ} 30' E$. The great extent of the R. Yobe drainage wetland area is shown in the accompanying figure, prepared from available 1:50,000 and 1:100,000 coloured Federal Survey maps. Only areas within the squared blocks



WETLANDS IN NIGERIA

on the figure were inspected for lakes on Federal Survey maps, since the available maps of the remaining parts of Nigeria were not coloured for surface water and are very difficult to interpret in this respect. No attempt was made to map wetlands south of $7^{\circ} 30' N$. The stippled area on the figure encompasses all $6^{\circ} 15' x 0^{\circ} 15'$ squares containing one or more lake of 20 hectares or over, with the exception of squares containing a single lake only and isolated by more than one square from other wetland areas.

Wildfowl counts were made in January, and also in December and February, at Lakes near Nguru ($12^{\circ} 55' N, 10^{\circ} 25' E.$), Hadejia ($12^{\circ} 35' N, 10^{\circ} 10' E.$ and $12^{\circ} 15' N, 10^{\circ} 05' E.$), Kano ($11^{\circ} 50' N, 8^{\circ} 30' E.$ and $11^{\circ} 52' N, 8^{\circ} 28' E.$) and Gaidam ($12^{\circ} 55' N, 11^{\circ} 55' E.$). Of Palearctic ducks, Garganey were recorded at nearly all localities, in flocks up to 500; but Pintail, Anas acuta although less widespread, tended to occur in much larger concentrations (up to 6000). Ferruginous Duck were found at most localities in numbers up to 300, but other species were scarce (Teal Anas crecca - 1; Wigeon - 1, 1, 3; Shoveler Spatula clypeata - 3 and 100; Tufted Duck Aythya fuligula - 12). Counts made at seven waters near the mouth of the River Yobe did not give spectacular results. 150 Garganey, 50 Pintail and 3 Shoveler were the only Palearctic species recorded, and African species were not numerous either. However the level of Lake Chad has been falling for four years, and this year for the first time since regular observation commenced in 1962 there was no dry-season flooding behind the coastal dunes (A.J. Hopson). The number of wildfowl recorded this year was thus "incredibly low" compared with previous years, and the White-faced Duck particularly has declined drastically.

African wildfowl were noted in hundreds at most of the northern lakes. Most widely distributed was the White-faced Duck with 200 at most lakes and 1500 at Nguru. The Pygmy Goose was widespread in small numbers on all waters, and Knob-billed Geese, Spur-winged Geese and Egyptian Geese occurred more locally in flocks up to 400, 200 and 150 respectively. The status of the Fulvous Duck Dendrocygna fulva in West Africa is far from properly understood; there are a few wet-season breeding records, and the species has now been recorded in Nigeria in all months, but in greatly varying numbers. During the census 100 were noted at Gaidam and 2000 at Nguru. The only other African species recorded during the census were White-backed Duck Thalassornis leuconotus (three localities - 1, 8 and 20 birds), and Hottentot Teal Anas punctata (1 at Kano, 2 At Zaria $11^{\circ} 15' N, 7^{\circ} 35' E.$ and 4 near Yau $13^{\circ} 20' E.$).

Of course, only the most sketchy indication of the distribution of wildfowl in Nigeria can hope to be gained by a limited number of observers, but by extrapolation of observations made at a few waters to the whole of the Yobe drainage basin, it seems that this area together with the western shore of Lake Chad may harbour in the order of 100,000 Palearctic duck in the dry season.

Remaining Areas

No wildfowl were seen in the census period at mining reservoirs on the Jos Plateau in Central Nigeria. Ducks and geese are never common here, but White-faced

Duck and Garganey occur regularly (the latter in the dry season only) in small numbers. To the south of Lake Chad there are marshes and lakes along the Yedseram and parallel rivers flowing northwards into the lake. This area is likely to contain dense populations of duck (A.J. Hopson). A count on the Yedseram near Bama (11° 30' N, 12° 40' E.) produced 300 Garganey, 200 Ferruginous Duck, and small numbers of three African geese. No counts were made on wetland areas of the River Gongola or R. Donga, both tributaries of the Benue which have adjoining extensive marshes.

Certain lakes in northern Sokoto Province in N.W. Nigeria were formerly well-known for their sport, but appear to have declined in importance in the last two decades. Gowers, quoted in Bannerman (loc. cit.), wrote that "Hundreds of acres of water were so covered with duck that you could not find a square yard without a duck" on Sokoto lakes about 1931. In January 1967, visits were made to several northern Sokoto waters, but very low numbers of wildfowl were recorded (150 White-faced Duck, 300 Pygmy Geese, 200 Garganey, and mostly less than 50 Knob-billed Geese, Spur-winged Geese, Pintail and Ferruginous Duck). It has been the experience of wildfowlers in recent years that the Sokoto lakes are less well stocked than formerly (R.E. Sharland). Identification of birds in the field was more of a problem for the early than the contemporary naturalist, and although Mallard Anas platyrhynchos, for instance, were recorded as plentiful in Nigeria about 1930, and in Gambia, it seems likely from the absence of any recent records (see Morel & Roux, 1966, La Terre et la Vie 1 : 19-72 for Senegambia) that the species does not occur and has not occurred at all south of the Sahara. Again, a correspondent quoted by Bannerman (1930-51) noted that Pochard Aythya ferina were one of the three commonest species on lakes north of Kano and in Sokoto Province, but there are only a few recent records of Pochard in Nigeria, all on northern lakes. However the other two species quoted as being amongst the three commonest were Shoveler and Pintail, and it is scarcely probable that errors of identification were made here. The Pintail is still common (although its numbers fluctuate widely from year to year), but the Shoveler is not, so there may have been great changes in the magnitude of wintering populations of some species in Nigeria. Besides the various species of European duck already mentioned, the only other species recorded in Nigeria is the Gadwall, Anas strepera one being shot near Lake Chad in 1929.

Early travellers' tales about water being black with duck can occasionally be matched at the present time, for one correspondent who visited Mopti, in the Inundation Zone, within the census period, wrote that "the sky was literally cloudy with duck", and comparable similes may at times be drawn in northern Nigeria also.

Acknowledgements

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the fire at Ahmadu Bello University in March 1967, but copies had already been sent to the I.W.R.B, from whom the data was re-obtained for the preparation of this report. The author would apologise to any census participants whose name is omitted above.

Summary

In January 1967 members of the Nigerian Ornithologists' Society participated in the I.W.R.B. Mid-winter census by counting wildfowl on representative waters in Nigeria. No Palaearctic geese or sea-duck occur in or off Nigeria, and Palaearctic duck do not occur on floodplains of the Niger/Benue rivers, but winter on the semi-permanent wetlands north of 12° N. The commonest species are Garganey and Pintail, the former being more widespread. Ferruginous Duck are less common, and Tufted Duck, Teal, Wigeon and Shoveler occur regularly but in very low numbers. In the order of 100,000 Palaearctic duck are thought to inhabit the Yobe drainage basin, between Kano and Lake Chad. The status of African species in Nigeria is briefly touched upon.