The history of potato-eating by wildfowl in Britain

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Abstract

The development of potato-eating and swede turnip-eating by wildfowl is linked to agricultural changes and climatic conditions in Britain. The tradition of taking waste potatoes from harvested fields began in Scotland among Mallard at least a century ago. A few Lancashire Pink-footed Geese acquired the habit about 30 years later, although potato-eating did not become widespread until the 1920's. On the other hand, Scottish Greylag Geese and some Whooper Swans have selected a regular diet of potatoes for only 20-30 years. Turnip-eating has been sporadic in bad weather among Whooper Swans in Aberdeenshire and became traditional after 1947 in the Greylag flocks on the Isle of Bute. The techniques used by the birds in dealing with roots are briefly described.

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