Woodpigeon Body Mass in Ireland: is Agricultural Intensification Involved?

[1, 2]Daire Ó hUallacháin, and [2]Jimmy Dunne
[1]Teagasc, Johnstown Castle Research Centre, Ireland
[2]Department of Zoology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

The aim of the present study was to gather information on the body mass of the woodpigeon in Ireland, how this mass differed from historical data and why? The study analysed the body mass of 299 adult woodpigeons shot in the years 2000-2002. The present study found that the average body mass of the woodpigeon was significantly greater than that of pigeons in many previous European studies. The results raise the question, is the apparent greater body mass due to changes in agricultural practises in recent decades e.g. intensification? With the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy the average crop yield has increased from 2.85 tonnes per hectare in 1952 to 8.3 tonnes per hectare (wheat) in 2003. Coupled with the greater productivity of the land is the fact that in recent years a greater variety of crops (e.g. Rape) are now planted. These introduced crops prolong the season of plentiful food availability. It is possible that the greater amount and variety of crops currently available to woodpigeons, has led to an increase in their body mass, particularly in winter, a period which historically yielded little food for woodpigeons. Previously, this lack of available food led to a reduction in body mass e.g. female woodpigeons in some previous studies underwent a 14% reduction in body mass in winter, whereas females in the present displayed a 4.9% reduction in body mass during the same period. A reduction in body mass increases the possibility of over-winter mortality.

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