

Wild Geese

PART 1

by Bob Elgas
Big Timber, Montana

It is interesting to note that all of the world's wild geese are native to the northern hemisphere. Although Canada geese from North America have been introduced into Australia and New Zealand, they are not native to that area. A number of goose-like birds are found in Africa and Australia. These birds are substantially different from true geese and are classified differently. South America is home to a large group known as sheldgeese. These birds might best be described as modified ducks which, as a result of evolutionary change, have assumed goose-like characteristics. As an example, they have adapted to a terrestrial existence and, like true geese, have become grazing animals. As a result, their legs have lengthened and moved forward to accommodate their adaptation to land areas. Their beaks have become more goose-like — again, to better adapt to grazing. The general appearance is much more like that of geese than ducks. However, there is one major difference that still links them with the ducks. Unlike the true geese, in which the sexes are identical (known as monomorphism), the sheldgeese are dimorphic and males and females are much different in outward appearance.

The geese of the northern hemisphere are divided into two groups: those that are known as brant geese or brant, and those referred to as true geese. Differences between the two groups are slight. Members of the brant family have black feet and bills, whereas true geese have colored feet and bills. Brant geese also have considerable black in the overall plumage, which is not seen in true geese. Despite these differences, and the fact that hybrids between the two forms

are sterile, the two groups are very close to each other.

True Geese

Throughout the northern hemisphere are nine species of true geese. They are the Bean geese, Greylag geese, White-fronted geese, Snow geese, the Bar-headed Goose, Pink-footed Goose, Swan Goose, Ross's Goose and the Emperor Goose. The true geese are classified in the genus *Anser*, from the Latin, meaning goose. Members of the brant family are in the genus *Branta*, from the Greek Brentos, also meaning goose.

The Bean goose, which is widely distributed throughout Europe and Asia, is represented by five well defined sub-species. They range in size from the comparatively small Russian Bean Goose to the large Midden-dorf's Bean Goose — a little known form found in remote areas of central China. Bean geese were so named because they frequently feed in bean fields, a food source not usually favored by other species of geese. Aside from the two species listed above, three other races exist — the Western Bean Goose (also known as the Yellow-billed Bean Goose), the Thick-billed Bean Goose, and Johann-son's Bean Goose. All Bean geese are similar in appearance. The head and neck are a rich brown, bodies are brownish gray, feet are bright orange, and bills are black with yellow markings.

The Swan Goose of China is unique. Its name is derived from the fact it has a very long black bill, much like that seen in the northern swans. It is the only member of the true goose family with a totally black bill. The plumage color is tawny buff and the feet are

orange. It is native to remote areas of central China, and little is known of its current status. It is generally believed, however, that it exists in comparatively low numbers. Interestingly, the Swan Goose was domesticated in China — probably long before the Greylag was domesticated in Europe. The white and brown Chinese, and the gray African are the three domestic forms that have evolved. The Brown Chinese is very similar in plumage to the Swan Goose, but is quite different in shape.

One of the more interesting groups is that made up of the various White-fronted geese. Their distribution is widespread, extending across most of North America, Europe and Asia. As is true with Bean geese, different sub-species vary in size. Basic plumage color varies from gray/brown in some races to rich brown in others. Feet and legs are orange and bills pinkish. At the base of the bill, on the fore part of the face, is a ring of white feathers, hence the name "White-front". A feature exclusive to the White-front clan is an irregular splotching of black

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feathers on the underside. From this they have been given the vernacular name of "speckle bellies." Five or six well defined races exist. The tiny Lesser White-front of Europe and Asia, which is scarcely larger than a Mallard Duck, is one of the most beautiful of the wild geese. The European White-front is found throughout Europe and parts of Asia. The Greenland White-front, as the name implies, breeds on Greenland. It winters largely on the west coast of Europe, but a small number migrates to the east coastal areas of the United States. It is a rich chocolate brown and tends to be heavily splotted with black on the belly. Indeed, some individuals are so heavily marked as to be almost totally black on the under side. The Pacific White-fronted Goose is found throughout the western half of North America. It is similar to the European White-front, but somewhat larger. It breeds abundantly in Alaska eastward into central arctic Canada. It winters largely in California, Mexico, Texas and as far eastward as Louisiana. Gambell's White-fronted Goose is a form surrounded in controversy and mystery. It was first described by Hartlaub in 1852 from specimens collected in Texas. If, indeed, it still exists, its numbers would be very low. It would winter in Texas and northern Mexico and breed in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. It differs from the Pacific White-front in being larger and generally darker. The Tule Goose is one of the most handsome of the White-front family. The history surrounding its existence is quite incredible, and much too long and involved for inclusion here. The Tule Goose is the largest of the White-front family. This is enhanced by the fact its entire structure is very elongated — neck, legs and body. Coupled with the large size, the elongated structure imparts a most elegant impression. They are a rich chocolate in color. They breed on the north shore of Cook Inlet, Alaska, and winter in the interior valley area of California. The population is not large.

There are two races of Greylag geese — the European and the Asian. They are alike in plumage pattern, which, as the name suggests, is largely gray. The European form is darker than its Asiatic counterpart. The Asiatic form has a substantially larger head and bill. Feet and bill of

the European Greylag are orange, while they are pink on the Asiatic variety. The European Greylag was domesticated long ago, and most of our common barnyard geese are descended therefrom. Greylags get their name from their obviously gray plumage but also because they are late migrants, lagging behind other geese in migration — thus, gray-lag.

There are two forms of Snow geese, Greater and Lesser. The description is somewhat ambiguous inasmuch as there is very little difference in size. Greater Snow Geese have a somewhat larger head and bill than the lesser variety, but the difference is hardly remarkable. Greater Snow Geese breed primarily on Greenland, and winter in coastal marshes of the eastern United States. They rarely stray very far inland. Lesser Snow Geese are much more widely distributed, breeding throughout much of arctic North America, and exclusive of the most eastern portions, are encountered during migration and in over-wintering areas in much of the United States. Lesser Snow Geese are one of the most abundant wild goose species. Snow geese are especially attractive. Exclusive of the wing tips, which are black, and the feet and bill which are pink, they are a gleaming pure white. Juveniles, however, are gray, but by the end of their first year also turn white. Interestingly, there is a dark phase of the Lesser Snow Goose commonly referred to as the Blue Goose. They are exactly like the white phase in habit, they intermingle, and interbreed. Blue geese have white heads as is seen in the white form, but the body is blue/gray, with a paler blue to the wings. For many years, it was debated if they were a separate species unto themselves. However, it has now been proven that they are one and the same, both are Lesser Snow Geese, but one a light phase and the other dark. Thus far there has been no record of a dark phase of Greater Snow Geese.

The tiny Ross's Goose is the smallest of the true geese, being only three to four pounds in weight. They are very similar to the white phase of Snow Geese, being all white, with black wing tips and pink feet and bills. Juveniles, however, are much less gray than juvenile Snow Geese. They breed largely in central arctic Canada, especially the Queen Maude Gulf area, and

migrate westward to winter in the interior valleys of California. A recent discovery indicates a blue phase of the Ross's Goose exists, although the occurrence is very rare.

The Pink-footed Goose breeds in Iceland and Spitzbergen and winters in western Europe. They are of medium size and brownish gray in color. As the name implies, feet and legs are pink. The bill is black with a band of pink just back from the tip. They are trim, graceful little geese.

The Bar-headed Goose is unique. It is the sole representative of the species. It is native to southeast Asia, especially India where it winters. It is a medium sized goose, elongate in structure, with silvery gray plumage. Feet, legs and bill are bright yellow, and there are two horizontal black bars on the back of the head, from which it derives its name. The silvery color, in conjunction with the graceful body proportions, makes them very attractive. An interesting phenomenon associated with Bar-headed Geese is that they cross the Himalaya Mountains during migration, often attaining altitudes well above the 20,000 foot mark. At this altitude, oxygen levels are very low and ornithologists are mystified at their capability to sustain themselves in the rarified air at such altitudes.

One of the most beautiful geese is the Emperor. Although it is not rare, because of the remote nature of the area it inhabits, it is perhaps encountered less frequently than any other species of goose. The breeding season is spent along coastal areas of the Bering Sea, especially the Yukon/Kuskoquim delta. It winters in the Aleutian islands, both areas being sparsely populated by humans. The Emperor is a medium sized goose. The head and nape is pure white while chin and throat are black. The body is a handsome shade of blue with darker markings. Feet are yellow and the bill is pale blue with black on the underside. Juveniles are a duller shade of blue with the head dark. During the winter the white head feathers begin to appear, and by the time they are a year old the head has assumed adult coloration. Early observers reported that Emperor Geese subsisted largely upon fish. This observation was incorrect. Emperor Geese eat grasses, and similar vegetation, exactly the same as other geese. ●

Western Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis fabalis*), also known as Yellow-billed Bean Goose. Other bean geese have a black bill with only a band of orange or yellow just forward of the nostrils.



Lesser Snow Goose (*Anser hyperborea*), *Anser* meaning goose and *hyperborea* meaning from beyond the north wind—referring to its far north breeding range.



Emperor Geese (*Anser canagica*).



Photos by Bob Elgas



Tule White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons elgasi*), from the description by Ripley and Delacour. Note the white front of the face, from which the name White-front originates and the barred breast giving rise to the vernacular name speckle belly.



European Greylag (*Anser anser anser*). The wild ancestor to our common barnyard domestic geese.