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Ducks, Geese, and Swans of the World by Paul A.
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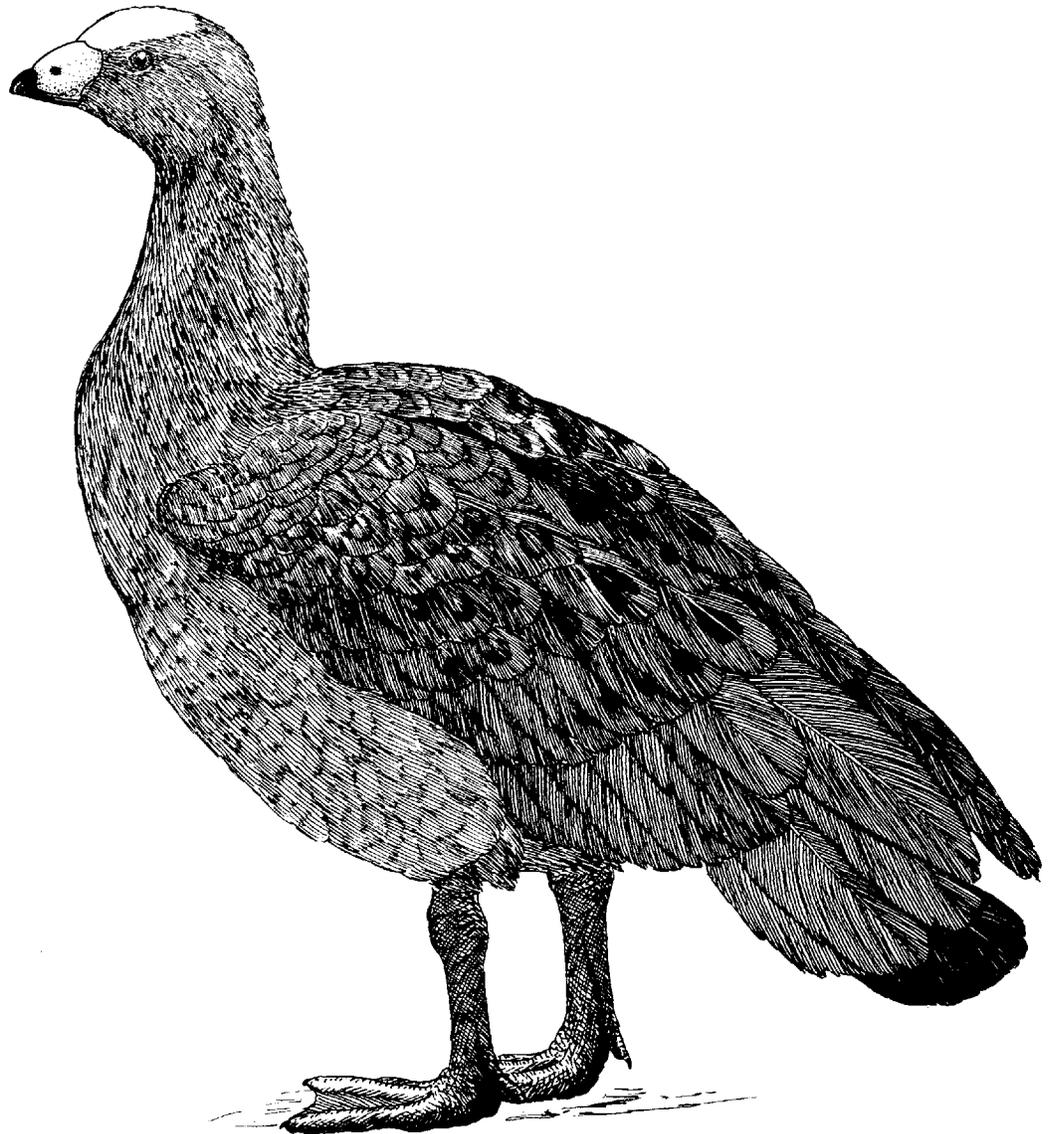
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Tribe Cereopsini (Cape Barren Goose)





MAP 31. Locations of residential populations of the Cape Barren goose; major population indicated by large X, other populations represented by small x.

Cape Barren Goose

Cereopsis novaehollandiae Latham 1801

Other vernacular names. *Cereopsis* goose, pig goose; Hühnergans (German); c  r  pse (French); ganso del Cabo Barren (Spanish).

Subspecies and range. No subspecies recognized. Breeding currently limited to the islands off Australia's southern coast, from the Furneaux group in the east to the Recherche Archipelago to the west, with nonbreeding groups occurring on the adjacent mainland during summer. See map 31.

Measurements and weights. Folded wing: males, 450–90 mm. Culmen: males, 45–50 mm. Weights: both sexes range 3,170–6,800 g (males average 5,290 g; females average 3,770 g (D. Dorward, pers. comm.)). Eggs: av. 78 x 55 mm, white, 137 g.

Identification and field marks. Length 30–39" (75–100 cm). Plate 22. The *cereopsis* has a unique short and cere-covered bill that is pale greenish yellow except for the nail and cutting edges, which are black. The plumage almost entirely dove gray, with the larger feathers having dark brown rounded or heart-shaped spots, especially on the larger wing coverts. The feet are black, and the legs vary from black to pink or carmine. *Females* are identical in appearance to males, and *juveniles* average slightly lighter than adults, but have heavier spotting on the wings. Their legs may vary from black to greenish in color.

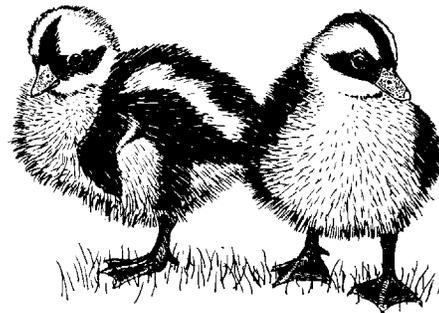
In the field, Cape Barren geese are unmistakable; their limited range places them out of contact with all other gooselike birds. Their call is a piglike grunt, and males also have a louder honking or trumpetlike note.

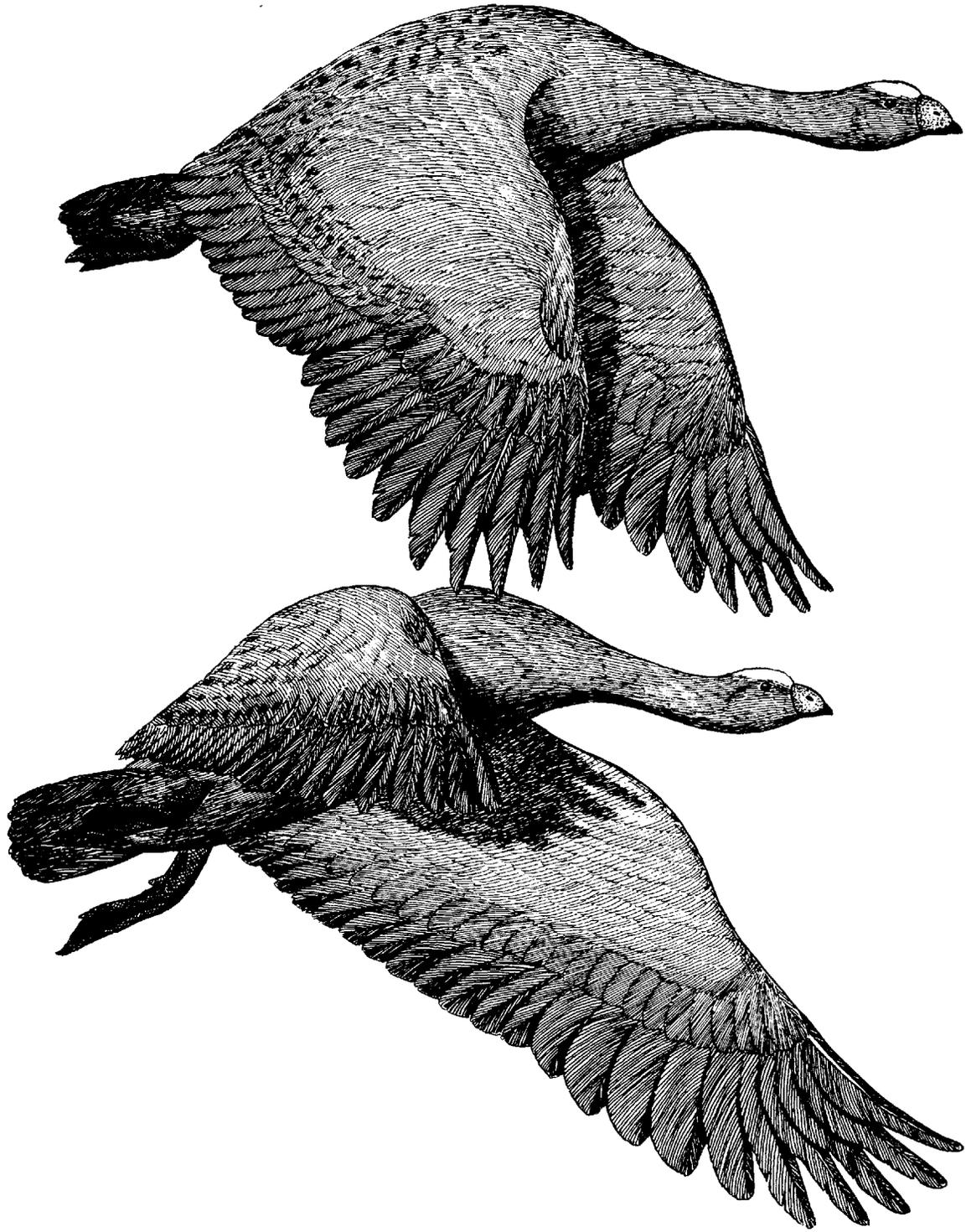
NATURAL HISTORY

Habitat and foods. Cape Barren geese are limited at present to various small islands, where they inhabit such open areas as beaches, promontories, and grassy areas, but avoid scrub except during nesting. They also avoid entering water except when injured, molting, or as juveniles. Their bills are adapted for grazing, and about two-thirds of all their food is composed of grasses, of which a common tussock grass (*Poa*) is the most important. Many other grasses are consumed, and the leaves and seeds of some broad-leaved plants (*Trifolium*, *Medicago*, etc.) and sedges are also eaten in smaller quantities

(Frith, 1967). Cape Barren geese can survive where little or no fresh water is available, and are able to excrete a solution saltier than sea water through their salt glands (Marriott, 1970).

Social behavior. Cape Barren geese are fairly gregarious, particularly nonbreeders, which may form flocks of up to 300 individuals. The breeding birds are found in flocks only during the molting period in October, otherwise they remain in pairs. From November through January they forage near their territory, from February to April they are actively defending their territories, and the period of nesting and rearing of young extends from May to October. The maximum density of breeding birds seems to be from one pair per acre to about one pair per 1.5 acres. After the breeding season many birds leave their nesting islands, and at that time flocks appear on the mainland of Australia, sometimes containing 50 to 60 birds; rarely as many as 500 occur near Lakes Alexandrina and Albert in South Australia. Pair formation takes the form typical of geese, with a well-developed triumph ceremony between the mates or potential mates; in this respect the species is closer to the true geese than to the sheldgeese. As in geese, pair bonds are strong and permanent, and the male fiercely defends the territory and nest. Copulation occurs on dry land, a nearly unique situation among waterfowl. Thus there are many differences in behavior from that of other geese, including an absence of head-dipping movements. The male walks around the female, pecking at her back and seemingly trying to push her to the ground. After she goes prone, the male walks around her several times, flaps his wings, and mounts. Afterward there is a mutual calling ceremony much like the usual triumph ceremony (Johnsgard, 1965a).





Reproductive biology. On the Furneaux group, nest building by the birds may begin as early as May, but June is the more typical month for this. Nests are usually placed in bushes or beside rocks or tussocks of *Poa*, especially in areas where there is good visibility. Rarely, nests have been found in trees such as tea trees (*Leptospermum*) as high as 18 feet from the ground. Nests are usually widely spaced and are sometimes built beside old sites. The nearest that two nests have been found has been 13 yards apart; close spacing seems to be typical of scrubby habitats rather than open and grassy ones. Clutch sizes are usually from 3 to 6 eggs, with 5 being the most frequently encountered number. The nests are well covered with down when the female leaves them; so far as is known, only the female incubates. The incubation period lasts about 35 days; and for a time after hatching, the adults keep their young in the breeding territory, leading them to water only when disturbed. The young cluster into nursery flocks at the age of about six weeks and begin to fly about October. In captive-raised birds, the age of fledging has reportedly been 70 days (Veselovsky, 1973). October is also the period of molting by adults and subadults (Guiler, 1967).

Status. The major stronghold of the Cape Barren goose is the Furneaux group, where in 1967 Guiler reported that aerial surveys in the 1960s resulted in counts of from about 1,000 in 1960 to 1,600 in 1965.

There are no permanent human residents on these islands, and although some are grazed, there is relatively little disturbance. Barring major changes in human disturbance, the conservation of at least this relict population of geese appears to be feasible (Guiler, 1967). It is probable that, as of 1975, about 16,000 Cape Barren geese existed in the wild, and thus they must be watched carefully if the species is to be preserved (Pierce, 1975).

Relationships. Delacour's (1954–64) relegation of this species to the sheldgoose tribe has been discussed by me (Johnsgard, 1961a, 1965a) and I have argued that it should instead be regarded as a primitive and aberrant goose. Woolfenden (1961) has supported the evidence for anserine affinities and suggested the erection of a monotypic tribe for the species. The species' swanlike (but not gooselike) characteristics have also been supported by a study of the photoresponses of the species for breeding (Kear & Murton, 1973), and these authors have also indicated that the bird is primitive and close to the stem-line of anatid stock. For these reasons the recognition of the tribe Cereopsini would appear justified. However, Brush (1976) recently, on the basis of an analysis of its feather proteins, supported my early position that the species is allied to the geese and swans rather than the sheldgeese, and that tribal separation is not warranted.

Suggested readings. Frith, 1967; Guiler, 1967, 1974.