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THREE SPECIES OF SIBERIAN GEESE SEEN IN NEBRASKA

At about 3:00 PM on 29 December 1984, while participating in the DeSoto NWR Christmas Count, Betty Grenon, David Starr, and the authors, Rick Wright and Alan Grenon, flushed from near the west shore of the DeSoto Cut-off (Washington Co., Nebraska) a party of seven Greater White-fronted Geese. With these seven geese was one distinctly larger, which drew our attention as the small flock flew above us for about five minutes. The larger bird displayed obvious damage to or loss of primaries on each wing, making it easier for the four of us to concentrate our observations on it and compare our impressions.



Bean Goose, DeSoto NWR, January 1985 --- Photo by B. J. Rose, Omaha

During this first in-flight sighting, each observer remarked independently on the superior size of the bird in relation to the White-fronts. Even at approximately 200 m. the distinctive soft-part colors and pale face-patches of the White-fronted Geese were clearly visible through binoculars, while the larger bird showed a bill apparently all dark. Most striking at this time was the rather swan-like profile, the result of a long neck and head and long, sloping bill. We also noted the orange feet, showing no flash of aluminum, and the plain underparts, shaded from the dark neck to the very pale vent. At this point, suspecting that the bird might not be merely an aberrant immature Greater White-front (Bean Goose, *Anser fabilis*, was mentioned as a possibility), we left the area.

We returned approximately half an hour later with spotting scopes, and found the flock still in the air; again the geese were at a considerable distance, but thanks to the excellent lighting and increased optical power, the large bird was even more clearly different. We estimated it to be 125% the size of its companions, with a proportionately longer neck and a markedly long head and bill profile. The bill was indeed dark, but at 22x showed a small light area at or near the tip. The underparts were as we had first observed them, and the light feather edgings of the dorsal surface were evident. The bright feet were clearly seen to be without bands.

We agreed that the bird probably was a Bean Goose, of unknown provenance, and prepared a documentation supporting our belief. Copies were submitted to Nancy Curry, CBC Compiler; Babs Padelford, for *American Birds*; and Barb Wilson, for the Iowa Records Committee (Nebraska having no such body for the rigorous evaluation of unusual sightings). These details are also available in the documentation file of the Editor of *The Nebraska Bird Review*.

The Bean Goose was found again 2 January 1985, by Nancy Curry. Before it left on 10 January it was seen by over 6,000 people, including the present authors, who spent the afternoon of 3 January watching it on the ice of the Cut-off, among about 200 Canada Geese of a large race. The Bean Goose was only slightly smaller than the Canadas, with a brown head and neck; neck furrows were visible, as they are in many of its congeners. The forehead was long, sloping into the long bill, which was dark but for a well-defined orange-yellow band at the tip; this mark went completely around both the mandible and the maxilla. The light edgings of the back feathers and upper wing coverts were conspicuous; there were white bands above and at the tip of the tail, as in the Greater White-fronted Goose. The feet were thick and bright orange, the surest way to pick the bird out quickly among the other geese. Good photographs were obtained by B. J. Rose, among others.

This excellent sighting let us see definitely the lack of nasal markers and leg bands. Both hind toes were intact, and the webs, seen well in good light as the bird walked and preened, were free of tattoos. The absence of any of these legally required marks of captivity does not prove the goose's wild origin, but in conjunction with the bird's wariness and accomplished flight, suggests that its presence in Nebraska was unassisted.

The bird's racial identity also supports the probability of natural occurrence. The large size and long bill with restricted color point to one of the east Palearctic races. While it was at DeSoto, the bird was generally assigned to *middendorfi*, although it seems to us now that the bill was perhaps not outside the range of *serrirostris*. Neither subspecies is known to be kept as a captive in the area, (but *brachyrhynchus*, variously treated as a race of the Bean Goose and as a distinct species, Pink-footed Goose, *Anser brachyrhynchus*, is present in the zoo at Omaha). That an escaped captive from elsewhere would occur at DeSoto seems not much more likely than that a wild individual should mingle with Greater White-fronted Geese in Siberia or Alaska and accompany them on their migration to the southern Great Plains; there is a strong inductive argument to be made from the occurrence (perhaps regular) of the Common Crane in flocks of Sandhill Cranes. Securing the specimen might have permitted a certain racial designation, minimally strengthening this geographic argument. We do not believe, however, that taking an unmarked bird could have finally settled the matter; the question of the bird's origin will be definitely resolved only if a waterfowl collector reports an escape in the fall or winter of 1984. Until then, though, we feel that wild provenance is the most satisfactory explanation.

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(Mrs. Grenon added that they had the National Geographic guide with them in the field. From 2 to 10 January the interior of the Refuge, normally closed to visitors during the winter, was opened to visitors to allow them to see the Bean Goose. During that period 6,707 visitors were counted at the Refuge. This included 3,829 at the visitors' center, many of whom also looked for the Bean Goose. Visitors were recorded from New York to California, and Minnesota to Texas. When the Bean Goose was in with the other geese, on the ice, unless it was on the near side of the flock, observers might have a long wait until it stuck its head up and it could be recognized by the orange mark on the bill. Colder weather is believed to have caused some of the geese, including the Bean Goose, to move on after 10 January, presumably to refuges farther south, but the Bean Goose has not been reported since. Siberian Bean Geese do visit Alaska; the European forms are casual in Iceland, and have been reported in eastern Canada. Palmer (*Handbook of North American Birds*, 2, 116) cites records in Massachusetts, New York, and Delaware (this latter possibly an escapee); Peterson's new eastern guide cites only the first two two of these, under Pink-footed Goose.

---Ed.)

The newspaper reports of the Bean Goose brought news of another; Ruth Green wrote in Audubon Society of Omaha's *A Bird's Eye View*, XIV, 1, 3; Bill Craig, of Ogallala, read about last month's Bean Goose and he was just sure he and his friend had killed one on 8 December, at Lake Lewellen, which is an arm of Lake McConaughy. Since neither he nor the game warden could identify the bird, he carefully photographed it and saved the head and feet in hopes of finding someone who could identify it later After reading all of Fred Thomas' articles, he contacted him and related his story. His

account was passed on to me in hopes I could help. His description over the phone did not convince me it was a Bean Goose, so he decided to mail it to me for closer inspection. It didn't take long to determine that it was in the same family of grey geese as the Bean Goose, but not a Bean Goose. The large, long, buffy head with a darker chestnut cap coming just below the eye, and running down the back of the neck to the mantle identified it as a Swan Goose, *Anser cygnoides*. The size, shape, and coloring of this species stands alone, so there is really no possibility of confusion with other species. It weighed nine pounds and it's "clean" appearance, plus the white around the bill, which the first-winter birds do not have, indicated a mature bird and the 98 mm culmen identified it as a male. At the time it was shot it was on the lake pretty much to itself, although there was a rather large flock of Canadas nearby. ... The wild species is indigenous to eastern Asia, just a little south of the range of the Bean Goose, and it winters in the Sea of Japan just as its cousin does. However, Swan Geese are fairly common in waterfowl collections, but most have been mixed with domestic birds over the years and there are few if any pure specimens in captivity, at least not in North America. Pure Swan Geese are very trim birds. long sloping foreheads and incredibly long and straight bills - all this describes the Ogallala bird perfectly. Domestic varieties on the other hand, are huge and cumbersome, often weighing up to 30 pounds, with a large frontal knob and much longer necks. Game birds raised in captivity are usually banded or marked on the feet in some way - this one was not.

After Mrs. Green wrote this she learned from the Game Commission that four other Swan Geese had been taken in the area.

In February 1985 the Game Commission reported that two Bar-headed Geese, *Anser indicus*, had been identified, in with Canadas on Lake Ogallala. But they are common among game breeders and it is presumed that they are escapees.