

One Skein of Geese

We birders have a tendency to be disdainful of waterfowl, to pooh-pooh the swans, geese, and ducks in the order Anseriformes.

Consider the following scenario. It's late August, and water levels at the local reservoir have been drawn down to the point that only a narrow ribbon of standing water remains, just ahead of the dam breast. Thirty-some terns stand shoulder-to-shoulder at the water's edge, and the leftmost bird definitely looks "interesting". Out in the water: gangly yellowlegs and hunchbacked peeps—but which species? On the far shore: a *Plegadis* ibis that stubbornly refuses to turn around. Other sightings—a watchful egret at the spillway, a rail scampering across a clearing, a little gathering of goldfinches at a sandbar—are not likely to interest the state records committee, but offer other rewards. The only birds that fail to impress, really, are the female-plumaged *Anas*-type waterfowl loafing on a grassy spit—dull and dopey-looking, probably common species, and impossibly hard to identify anyhow.

Here's another scenario. The tour leader has just concluded her safety briefing, the captain has throttled up the engine, and the boat is threading its way through the buoys and past the jetty. Everything happens too quickly: "Left or right of the Surfbird?" "Which one is the Brandt's?" "Elegants? Did someone say these are *Elegant Terns*?" "That alcid just dove. Again." "Buller's Shearwater!" Even the Western Gulls, the *Aechmophorus* grebes, and the sociable sea lions draw rave reviews; that's because this is the first West Coast pelagic trip for you and your birding companion. Somebody comments on a distant string of sea ducks, but the two of you ignore the matter. After all, they have those back East.

One more scenario. It's dawn, on the morning of the Christmas Bird Count, at your favorite spot—a remnant cattail marsh that has managed to survive the late-twentieth-century ravages of road building and residential development. And it's your only chance for Swamp Sparrow, Wilson's Snipe, and the Pine Warbler that was spotted here last week—"good" birds all, on this particular CBC. The sparrow calls. The snipe flushes. You think you've picked up the warbler's call note. And then pandemonium:

two dozen Canada Geese, splashing, crashing into the water, honking and hissing at each other, going at it for a good five minutes, by which time you've completely lost track of the presumptive warbler. You depart from the scene in disgust, without even bothering to count the honkers.



At the CBC compilation supper that evening, you learn that your arch-nemesis was caught "poaching" on your territory right before sundown. Annoyingly, she managed to pin down the Pine Warbler—right where you thought you had heard it—for just the third CBC record. And to add insult to injury, she produced the bird du jour, on *your* territory: a Cackling Goose in a flock of twenty-five Canadians, the first record for the county.

A Cackling What?

Cackling Goose, *Branta hutchinsii*, short-necked, stub-billed, and squeaky-voiced, a high-Arctic breeder that winters widely in the southern and western reaches of the ABA Area. The species is variable, like most geese, and hybrids are known. But for the most part, it is an easy ID. Even the earliest field guides depicted one or more races of the Cackling Goose, and generations of duck hunters have readily distinguished "Cacklers" from their larger brethren. For decades, CBC participants have been required to record "small forms" and "large forms" of the species formerly known as the Canada Goose. And the august American Ornithologists' Union Check-list Committee recently elevated Cackling Goose to full-species status, in its July 2004 "Check-list Supplement" published in *The Auk*. But you weren't paying attention, and your nemesis was; so she got the good bird, and you got skunked.



No question about it, we're going to be paying more attention to *Branta* geese in the years to come. The Cackling Goose is for real, a legitimate addition to your ABA life list. And in the recent technical literature it has been hinted that the erstwhile "Canada Goose" may be split even further. Meanwhile, the status and taxonomy of the remainder of the North American *Branta* fauna bear monitoring: The Brant

may involve three separate species, all of which have occurred in the ABA Area; and the possibility that the Barnacle Goose may be a regular vagrant from western Europe raises the prospect that the species shall soon be “countable” in much of eastern North America.

But is there more to the Canada Goose and its congeners than just another tick, or ticks? There certainly is. The *Birds of North America* account for the “species” contains more than 400 literature citations, on topics as diverse as mitochondrial DNA and morphological evolution, renal coccidiosis and epizootic necrotic enteritis, neckband icing and forced copulation. The Canada Goose, *sensu lato*, has long been admired as a “model system” for exploring matters such as pair-bond formation, imprinting, and toxicology. And we should be on the lookout for continuing insights from this fascinating creature. For example, Canada Geese in the West (and elsewhere perhaps) have recently “discovered” that the roofs of high-rise buildings provide a novel venue for nest placement—a development that has consequences for our understanding of the biological phenomena of niche expansion and cultural transmission of information.

If you stop to think about it, nearly all of our seemingly familiar waterfowl species deserve greater study by the modern birder. Yes, the status of *taverneri* vis-à-vis Cackling vs. Canada Goose is a mess. But what of the more fundamental questions? Did you know that male Mallards don’t quack?

Know what species of shorebird a displaying Common Goldeneye is often mistaken for? Got a handle on the molts and plumages of the widespread Long-tailed Duck? What color are a Green-winged Teal’s feet? A Gadwall’s? (Curiously, many of us can answer that foot-color question for Thayer’s Gull, or Lesser Black-backed Gull, or whatever gull is rare in our area—but not for super-common puddle ducks.)



Kimball L. Garrett, writing in the December 2000 issue of *Birding* (p. 527), probably spoke for most birders when he grouched:

I have a thing about female ducks. I don't like them, and I never have. In my birding infancy in the 1960s I resolutely ignored female ducks—there were just too many other avian wonders vying for my attention.

But then:

It was constant nagging from my frequent birding companion, Jon Dunn, that wore me down. Ducks were doable, he convinced me, if only one gave them a chance. This is true, of course, of any group of birds, but female ducks weren't welcomed into my ID-consciousness for quite some time.

Indeed, ducks are doable. They can be identified. They can be studied—and understood. And many of us, eventually, do get around to doing ducks, if begrudgingly so.

There is one final step in the maturation of the waterfowl-watcher. It might come at a smartweed-and-lotus-choked retention pond, inhabited by a handful of female ducks. Maybe on a wet winter afternoon at the seventeenth hole, abandoned weeks ago by the golfers and now the sole domain of handsome Greenheads and proud Honkers. Maybe at a busy street-crossing, where a stern Canada Goose is ushering her charges to the “duck pond” a block away—and where moments earlier, she was nudging the hapless fluffballs from their nest atop a twenty-story bank headquarters. Or maybe from an unmanicured farmstead in Sand County, Wisconsin, where Aldo Leopold observed:

One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving

the murk of a March thaw, is the spring.

There was a time—there still can be for each one of us—when the sight, the sound, of migrating geese evoked feelings of satisfaction, of contentment, of something akin to reverence. It wasn’t so long ago that Roger Tory Peterson wrote:

Few men have souls so dead that they will not bother to look up when they hear the barking of wild geese.

What is it about Peterson’s remark that makes us smile? There is little measure of profundity here, and still less of poetry. Instead, there is a sentiment that has all the artlessness of sincerity, all the transparency of the truth.

— Ted Floyd



Cackling Goose (below) and Canada Goose (above).
Pen-and-ink on Bristol board by © Steve Carbol.