

THE STATUS OF ROSS'S GOOSE IN FLORIDA

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The first record of Ross's Goose (*Chen rossii*) in Florida was in 1987 (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992); since then, the species has occurred in Florida less than annually but with increasing frequency. The purpose of this note is to formally document another record of Ross's Goose and evaluate all its records or reports (*sensu* Robertson and Woolfenden 1992) in Florida. I place these occurrences from Florida within an historical and distributional context by including a summary of the recent winter range expansion of Ross's Goose to other states in the extreme southeastern United States east of the Mississippi Valley. Ryder and Alisauskas (1995) did not present this information.

I discovered an adult Ross's Goose at Apalachicola, Franklin County, on 16 Nov 1996. The bird arrived during a severe cold front. The Ross's Goose frequented a vacant lot near the tip of a small peninsula underneath the Gorrie Bridge at the mouth of the Apalachicola River, where it foraged on grasses and sedges. The bird honked once in response to an imitation of a Snow Goose (*C. caerulescens*) call. The Ross's Goose arrived alone, flew strongly, but eventually joined a mixed group of feral ducks alongside the river and became quite tame. The Ross's Goose remained at this location through 28 December, after which the goose plus the entire group of ducks disappeared. The probable cause was poaching.

The smaller size, shorter tarsi and neck, rounded head, furrowed neck feathers, very slight arch in maxillary and mandibular tomia, short stocky bill where the feathers of lores met the base of the maxilla forming an almost straight line, and blue-green caruncles at the base of the bill, distinguished this Ross's Goose from a Snow Goose or a hybrid Ross's x Snow Goose. The identification of the Ross's Goose is verified by photographs (Tall Timbers Research Station Photo Collection P692-694; P695: Fig. 1). The Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee accepted this record (Florida Ornithological Society Archives 99-399; kept at the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida, Gainesville).

The following are verified records of Ross's Goose that have appeared in Florida. The occurrences were of single birds.

(1) Adult, 22 December 1987, Leon County (Ogden 1988, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Anderson and Baker 1994, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Photographs (FOSA 88-133). The bird occurred with a flock of Snow Geese.

(2) Adult, 10 December 1991, Leon County (Cox 1992, Ogden 1992, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Anderson and Baker 1994, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Photographs (FOSA 92-252). The bird occurred with a flock of Snow Geese.

(3) Adult, 12 March to at least early December 1999, Crystal River, Citrus County (Pranty 1999c; B. Pranty, pers. comm.). Photograph (pers. exam. of photo website: <http://www.photoloft.com/album>). The goose has remained in back yards with feral Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*).

The following seven occurrences of Ross's Goose that have appeared in Florida lack supporting specimen or photographic documentation. All occurrences were of one to four birds.

(1) Adult, 8 November 1995, Leon County (Pranty 1996a).

(2) Adult, 9 November to 22 December 1996, Merritt Island N.W.R., Brevard County (Pranty 1997a,b). The bird was found dead about 22 December, but deposition of the specimen is unknown.



Figure 1. Adult Ross's Goose at Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida, 16 November 1996. Note the short tarsi and neck, round head, very slight arch in maxillary and mandibular tomia, and short stocky bill where the feathers of lores meet the base of maxilla forming an almost straight line (see text for additional details). Photograph by T. E. Lewis (TTRS P695).

(3) One bird, 23 December 1996 to 12 January 1997, western Duval County (Pranty 1997b, West 1997). Photographs were purportedly submitted to the FOSRC, but the committee has not received these photos or evaluated this report (L. Atherton, *in litt.*). The bird occurred with a flock of Snow Geese.

(4) One bird, 1-5 December 1997, Leon County (Pranty 1998). Photographs were purportedly submitted to the FOSRC, but the committee has not received these photos or evaluated this report (L. Atherton, *in litt.*).

(5) Up to four birds (three adults, one immature), 18 November 1998 to 23 February 1999, Fort Walton Beach sewage treatment facility, Okaloosa County (Pranty 1999a,b). The small flock occurred with a much larger flock of Snow Geese.

(6) Two adults, 6-16 December 1998, Zellwood, Orange County (Pranty 1999b). The birds occurred with a large flock of Snow Geese.

(7) One bird, 21 December 1998, Shalimar, Okaloosa County (Pranty 1999b).

In two additional records, the identity of Ross's Goose was questionable.

(1) Immature, 1-24 Jan 1981, Taylor County (Stevenson 1981, Anderson and Baker 1994). Photograph (TTRS P318). The bird occurred with a flock of Snow Geese. Stevenson and Anderson (1994) stated the bird was probably a hybrid Ross's x Snow Goose or small Snow Goose, whereas Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) suggested they were more certain of its identification as a Ross's Goose.

(2) Adult, 18 February to 13 March 1996, Lake Woodruff N.W.R., Volusia County (Pranty 1996b, Langridge 1996). Published photograph (Langridge 1996). This bird was originally identified as a Ross's Goose. However, examination of the photograph suggests the bird is a hybrid Ross's x Snow Goose. The bird has several apparent intermedi-

ate characters: the bill is somewhat slender and elongated, the base of the maxilla forms a partial forward arch with the feathers of the lore, and the caruncles are barely visible (see figure 1 in Trauger et al. 1971). In addition, the neck appears proportionally longer and the head less rounded than in Ross's Goose.

Ryder and Alisauskas (1995) stated the frequency of hybrid Ross's x Snow Geese on the breeding range ranged between 1.9-4.7%. The occurrence of one hybrid and one bird of uncertain identity in Florida suggests that observers should not overlook the occurrence of hybrid Ross's x Snow Geese.

East of the Mississippi Valley in the extreme Southeast, the months and years of first occurrence (record or valid report) of Ross's Goose is as follows: Alabama (Dec 1982), Florida (Dec 1987), Georgia (Feb 1989), and South Carolina (Nov 1995) (Ortego 1983, Manns 1989, Ogren 1989, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Worthington 1997; G. D. Jackson, *in litt.*). All states have had additional occurrences, especially Alabama which now has had about 21 (Drennen 1988, Simbeck 1988, Parrish 1994, Bremser 1995, Miller 1998; G. D. Jackson, *in litt.*). This winter range expansion of Ross's Goose to the extreme southeastern United States in the late 1980s and 1990s is correlated with their recent population increase and range expansion southeastward on the breeding range (Ryder and Alisauskas 1995). Most Ross's Geese in the Southeast have been identified as adults although immature birds in late winter could be overlooked because only small patches of grayish wash may remain on head and mantle (cf., Parrish 1994; see Ryder and Alisauskas 1995).

In summary, Florida has four records of Ross's Goose, of which the bird at Apalachicola is the third. Seven additional occurrences have not been documented or evaluated by the FOSRC, although the identification of these birds is probably valid. All above occurrences have been since 1987, which is consistent with recent occurrences in other states of the extreme Southeast. One other occurrence in Florida was a record of an apparent hybrid Ross's x Snow Goose. The identity of the remaining occurrence is unresolved.

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