

Ross' Goose in Mississippi

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Ross' Goose (Chen rossii) winters primarily in California's Central Valley. It has been occasionally taken by hunters in Louisiana and Texas and seen east to Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina (Bellrose 1976; Bent 1962; Peterson 1961; Terres 1980; pers. comms. with T.M. Wilkins, H. Beierman, A.L. Bowman, and P. Yakupzak). Ross' Goose is often found in flocks of the more common Snow Goose (C. caerulescens). Large concentrations of white and blue phase Snow Geese pass through Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge, Washington County, Mississippi, each year enroute to or from the Gulf Coast. To my knowledge, there have been no reports of Ross' Goose until now from inland Mississippi.

On the afternoon of 16 February 1986, I observed two white waterfowl swimming together in Deer Lake at the refuge. They stayed close together with the larger following the smaller one. The larger of the two was immediately recognized as a Snow Goose. The other was 30% smaller with a small triangular bill, light at the tip and dark at the base. Its neck-to-body proportions seemed more like that of a duck than a Snow Goose. With 7x50 binoculars at 40 m, no grin patch was visible, whereas the grin patch ("black lips") on the larger goose was. As I reached for a spotting scope the smaller goose flushed; the larger goose followed the smaller one closely from the water into the air, overhead in flight and again on the ground after they landed 200 m away. The two white geese had dropped in among 35 White-fronted Geese (Anser albifrons) feeding in a winter wheat field.

At that time I notified Refuge Manager Tim Wilkins by radio that an unusual goose was on the refuge. Wilkins had prior experience identifying Ross' Goose but had not seen it on Yazoo NWR before. Within minutes he was watching the suspect bird feeding in the wheat within 100 to 200 m of our 60x spotting scopes. The geese all flushed as I tried to approach within 100 m. The Ross' Goose took wing first, heading to my left. The Snow Goose flushed one wingbeat later going right. A second later the 35 White-fronted Geese took off towards the Snow Goose.

By the time the 37 geese were all airborne they were all flying in formation with the Snow Goose leading them north and the Ross' Goose had made a U-turn and caught up with the end of the line.

The wingbeat and flight speed of the Ross' Goose were faster than those of the Snow Goose; by comparison, the White-fronted Geese looked slow, unhurried, even nonchalant. The Ross' Goose quickly moved up the ranks to the front of the flock and then turned east towards Deer Lake Slough. The 37 geese landed amidst 4000 Snow Geese, 1000 Canada Geese (Branta canadensis), and 600 White-fronted Geese over 600 m away. It was impossible to locate one small white goose in a flock of 5600 larger geese.

On 17 February 1986, at least one Ross' Goose was observed off and on for a total of over an hour among 3500 blue and white phase Snow Geese in the wheat west of Deer Lake between 11:00 and 17:00. Scanning the large flock from side-to-side from a distance of 200 m would consistently reveal a small sparkling white goose with a short, thick curved neck. Its rounded head would be tipped forward so the bottom of its small dark bill dropped 30 degrees below horizontal. The size of the flock prevented keeping track of one bird for very long, causing suspicion that more than one Ross' must have been present.

By 18 February, the lateness of the season and warm southerly breezes had pared the goose population to 2500; on 19 February, 1500 remained; on 20 February the last 40 geese on Yazoo NWR were Canadas. As the total number of geese dwindled it became possible to follow individuals within the flock. On 18 February three Ross' Geese were seen among the 2500 blue and white Snows. On 19 February four Ross' were seen at one time scattered among 1500 blues and white phase Snow Geese.

The first Ross' was noticed primarily due to its diminutive size in comparison to the nearby Snow Goose. Several hours of subsequent observations over the course of four days revealed many other differences between these two closely-related species. Besides up to a 30% size difference, major differences noted in the field are listed in Table 1.

In summary, four Ross' Geese were seen in Mississippi at Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge between 16-19 February 1986. Several diagnostic features were noted that can be used for species' identification.

Table 1. Differences in appearance between Snow and Ross' geese.

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Snow Goose</u>	<u>Ross' Goose</u>
Head Shape	Sloped forehead	Rounded
Profile resembled	Canvasback	Redhead
Body size	Large	10-30% smaller
Neck:		
Length	Long	25-50% shorter
Thickness/length	< 1/5 length	> 1/4 length
Thinnest part	7 cm below head	At head
Shape	Long, slender hourglass	Goitrous or pear-shaped
Attitude	Held straight	Held in S-curve
Bill:		
Impression	Curvaceous	Conical
At cheek	Concave	Straight
Top (between eyes)	Concave	Straight
Chin	Concave	Straight
At eyes	Convex projection	Sharp 75-degree angle
Color darkest	At grin patch	At base
Size	Large	50% smaller
Attitude	Held horizontal	Tipped down 30 degrees
Wingbeat speed	Moderate	Rapid

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