

IDENTIFICATION QUIZ



A white goose with pink bill and feet and black primaries should not present much of an identification problem: the choice would be either Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) or Ross' Goose (*C. rossii*). Even so, a single adult individual that spent the winter of 1984-1985 in Upper Newport Bay, Orange County, California, caused a certain amount of consternation for many observers. Those viewing it at a distance, where body size estimates were difficult, noted the longer bill with prominent "grinning patch" and tended to identify it as a Snow Goose. It was so reported on the 1984 Christmas Bird Count in that area. Since the bird spent much of its time among bread-mooching American Coots and Mallards at the local "let's-feed-the-ducks" place, other observers, myself included, first saw it at very close range (less than 10 feet) and were strongly influenced by its overall small size and more rounded head profile to call it a Ross' Goose. This discrepancy prompted closer examination by several observers and a consideration of all field marks of the two species.

Ross' Goose is a small bird, little larger than a Mallard, with a short stubby two-toned bill (blue or greyish at the base) that lacks the "grinning patch." The Snow Goose on

the other hand is clearly a much larger bird; Snow Geese are, on the average, more than twice the body weight of Ross' Geese. The head and neck of a Snow Goose are proportionally larger and the bill, complete with "grinning patch," is longer than in a Ross' Goose. The juncture of the feathers of the lores and the base of the upper mandible forms a straight line in a Ross' Goose and a sharply curved arc in a Snow Goose. Both species have a distinctive blue phase (see illustrations in Field Guide to the Birds of North America, National Geographic Society) although it occurs at very low frequencies in Ross' Goose populations (McLandress and McLandress, Auk 96:544-550, 1979). There are also recognizable vocal differences between the two species.

The bird in question lacked the very stubby bill of a Ross' Goose and had the "grinning patch" of a Snow Goose. The bill did not appear as long as in a typical Snow Goose and the "grinning patch" was somewhat smaller than usual. The bill showed some blue coloration at the base but was not as sharply two-toned as in a Ross' Goose. The head was not as massive and angular as in a Snow Goose or as diminutive and rounded as in a Ross' Goose. The juncture of the loreal feathers and upper mandible formed only a slightly rounded arc. In size, the bird was larger than a typical Ross' Goose but seemed smaller than a typical Snow Goose, particularly when seen side by side with Mallards or American Coots.

All of the above suggested to several observers that the bird was a hybrid. Fred Cooke, who has extensive experience with Snow Geese, examined black and white photographs and a color slide of the bird in question and concurred on its apparent hybrid origin. He did feel that the bill was somewhat longer than might be expected for such a hybrid. Robert McLandress, after seeing black and white photos of the bird, thought that it was arguably a hybrid, or at least not a typical one, and that its apparent small size could have been accentuated by spending much time in "submissive" postures as would be typical of injured, sick, or "lone" geese. The Newport Bay goose did not appear injured or sick, was seen in very alert postures on several occasions, and migrated on schedule that spring.

Ross' and Snow geese are known to nest together in the same arctic areas and a number of hybrids between the species, including both white and blue morphs, have been reported. Hybrid specimens tend to be intermediate in most linear measurements as might well be expected (Trauger, Dzubin and Ryder, Auk 88:856-875, 1971; McLandress and McLandress op. cit.). One unsuccessful attempt was made to capture the Newport Bay goose and get the measurements which would have clarified the proposed hybrid origins of this bird.

Specimens of Ross' x Snow Goose hybrids were first reported only from the Central Flyway but are now known from both the Central and Pacific flyways. However, such birds are easily overlooked and may occur in both flyways more commonly than previously reported. Had the bird in question been part of even a small flock of Snow Geese it is doubtful that it would have attracted much attention; I feel it would have stood out rather obviously among a group of Ross' Geese. Such hybrids are one thing more for observers to be aware of and look for among the large wintering flocks of white geese.

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Eurasian Dotterel (*Charadrius morinellus*), Point Reyes, Marin County, California,
9 September 1986

Photos by Richard Hallowell

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