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PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF CACKLING AND CANADA GEESE

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Now that the American Ornithologists Union (A.O.U.) has split the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) into two species (Banks et al. 2004) field birders are faced with the not inconsiderable problem of telling the two apart. This identification issue is especially challenging for birders in the West, where a number of races of both species occur. Of the four subspecies that now constitute the Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*), the nominate Richardson's Cackling Goose (*B. h. hutchinsii*) is almost unknown west of the Rocky Mountains (A.O.U. 1957), while the diminutive and very dark Cackling Goose proper (*B. h. minima*) is unlikely to be mistaken for any form of the Canada Goose. The Aleutian Cackling Goose (*B. h. leucopareia*) has features, such as a complete white ring at the base of the black neck, that make identification of most individuals straightforward.

Conversely, most individuals of three of the four western subspecies of the Canada Goose are either too large and pale (Great Basin Canada Goose, *B. c. moffitti*), or too large and dark (Vancouver Canada Goose, *B. c. fulva*, and Dusky Canada Goose, *B. c. occidentalis*) to be confused with Cackling Geese. Please note that I said "most."

The subject of this issue's Featured Photo is the identification of the two subspecies of these now full species that resemble each other most closely. Taverner's Cackling Goose (*B. h. taverneri*) has been recognized as a subspecies distinct from the Lesser Canada Goose (*B. c. parvipes*) only since the 1950s (Delacour 1951). Indeed, the A.O.U. (1957) did not include *taverneri* in the 5th edition of its checklist, and Palmer (1976) believed Taverner's to be only the darker individuals of a clinal population of *parvipes*. However, genetic work has shown that breeding populations of *taverneri* fit neatly with other Cackling Geese, and those of *parvipes* belong to the Canada Goose complex (see the citations in Banks et al. 2004).

The upper photo shows an individual believed to be *B. c. parvipes*, the middle photo depicts an apparent *B. h. taverneri*, and the bottom photo compares the same two individuals resting side by side, with the *parvipes* on the left. I believe both these individuals are adults, on the basis of the broadness of the body feathers and the nice, neat rows of pale edging on the back and wing coverts. These photos were taken in Arrowhead Marsh, Alameda County, California, in January 2004. Compare them with photos of a juvenile apparent *taverneri* on the World Wide Web at www.badboybirding.com/CAGO_11262003.htm.

Delacour (1954) described these two forms as follows: *parvipes* "similar to *moffitti* in shape and proportions, particularly the long bill and neck, and also generally in color, although varying a little more in tone, but much smaller"; *taverneri* "resembles *B. c. parvipes* but smaller with shorter bill and neck, and generally darker, although very variable in color, some specimens being as pale as *parvipes*, others as dark as *leucopareia*."

More recent treatments of Canada Goose identification haven't added much, but Johnson et al. (1979) found that the breast of *taverneri* is typically grayish, but quite variable, and frequently lighter in young birds, whereas *parvipes* has a pale breast, "sandy" colored rather than the brownish of *leucopareia* or the darker grayish of *taverneri*. These authors discussed white neck rings, noting that 40% of adults and 10% of immatures of *taverneri* have complete neck rings averaging 3–5 mm wide, with an additional 20–30% showing incomplete or trace neck rings. In their much

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smaller sample of *parvipes*, 8% of adults had complete neck rings averaging 8 mm in width, and 30% more showed traces of a ring. Almost all of their sample of *leucopareia* had a complete, solid neck ring averaging 14 to 20 mm in width, depending on age. Palmer (1976), however, cited a survey of nesting *leucopareia* on Buldir Island in which 17 of 64 individuals either lacked a white collar or had breasts so pale that the collar was not discernible.

The two physical measurements most often compared between the two forms are culmen length and weight. A recent summary of these data (Mowbray et al. 2002) demonstrated that the mean culmen length for *taverneri* is about 35 mm, that for *parvipes* about 42 mm, but that there is overlap (range 33–40 mm for *taverneri* and 38–44 mm for *parvipes*). More important than actual culmen length is the proportional appearance of the bill. In *taverneri* the bill is high (i.e., more centrally located on the face, with larger “jowls”) and short, like that of other Cackling Geese, whereas in *parvipes* the bill appears longer and lower, like that of larger Canada Geese. The mean weight of *taverneri* is about 2500 grams, that of *parvipes* just over 3000 grams, or about a pound heavier.

The presence of a black line on the throat dividing the white chin strap has been touted as a character useful for distinguishing the two forms. In our featured birds, this line can be seen on the *taverneri* but is not present on the *parvipes*. The smudginess and small size of the chin strap on the *taverneri* has also been suggested as useful. Other pictures I have seen of purported *taverneri* have also shown a black chin stripe and smaller, grayer chin straps, but there is wide disagreement among observers as to the prevalence of these features in various populations of Canada-type geese. The only reference I have found in the literature is from Palmer (1976), who stated that the black stripe “is much more frequent northwesterly, especially in darker-pigmented birds, and evidently in males.” This statement seems to be the basis of later claims, but no extensive surveys have been done, especially in the two taxa under discussion here, and observations from the east coast suggest that even eastern Canada Geese show a dark chin stripe not too infrequently. I’ve seen no formal references at all to the size or color of the chin straps.

At present, the best an observer can hope for is to find flocks of the two forms, in which the average larger size, longer/lower bill, paler breast, and maybe fewer black chin stripes of *parvipes* Canada Geese should separate them from *taverneri* Cackling Geese. This comparison brings up the question of range. The current center of abundance for wintering *taverneri* is the lower Columbia River area and the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Some individuals also winter in the Columbia Basin of eastern Washington and Oregon, but they are outnumbered there by *parvipes*. A small number of the latter also winters in the Willamette Valley; however, the preponderance of *parvipes*, as currently understood, winters east of the Rocky Mountains, at least as far south as the Texas panhandle. Both forms were formerly common in California’s Central Valley, but numbers there are now greatly reduced, as these birds have increasingly taken to wintering farther north.

The extent of variation in all the suggested identification characters is currently unknown. This variation can be caused by differences in age, sex, diet, and nutrition, as well as by individual variability. In cases of lone vagrant individuals, many will remain unidentifiable because of this variability. In addition, observers are cautioned that confusion among other subspecies of white-cheeked geese is possible. For example, some *taverneri* Cackling Geese can approach some *occidentalis* Canada Geese in size and coloration. These are subjects for other papers.

I thank Stephen J. Davies for contributing the photographs for this feature, and Stephen C. Rottenborn for his extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

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