

Nick Pulcinella

112-01-2003

From: <JerryMcW@aol.com>
To: <nickpul@bellatlantic.net>
Sent: Saturday, November 15, 2003 2:50 PM
Subject: Ross's Goose description

Ross's Goose
 Chen rossii

Location: Foot of East Avenue and Port Access Road, Erie, Pa.

Date: November 12, 2003

Time: about 8:30-9:15 AM

Weather: Cloudy, winds strong westerly sustained at 30 mph with gust at 60+ mph

Observer: Jerry McWilliams

Optics: Zeiss 10 X 40 Binocular and Kowa spotting scope set at 30X

Viewing distance: As close as 100 yards in flight and perhaps 300 yards when sitting on the water

Description: Since Presque Isle State Park was closed due to downed limbs and power lines Ben Coulter and I decided to go to the foot of East Avenue where we thought most gulls would be concentrating, because it was on the Leeward side of the wind. While looking through flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls I noticed a flock of 13 white geese coming towards. I got Ben on the birds and called them Snow Geese, which is what one would expect here. As they got closer to us they turned and flew past our parking lot heading west and at that time I noticed that there was definitely something wrong with these birds. Ben was standing outside the car trying to steady himself against the wind looking through his scope and I was in the car with my scope attached to the window. I jumped out of the car and told Ben that I think these birds may be Ross's Geese. At that very moment Ben had assessed the same thing. They circled around a few more times and even approaching closer so that we could study them again. The following is what I clearly saw on these birds when they were in flight:

Despite the fact that there was nothing near them to get a relative size comparison, they seemed small. All birds in the flock were white showing the characteristic black primaries of Snow/Ross's Goose. At least four of the birds were white juveniles and the rest were white adults. All birds showed small triangular-shaped dingy looking bills with very rounded heads and steep foreheads, as opposed to slanting or sloping foreheads typical of Snow Geese. There was no broad black cutting edge to the bill, "black grin," typically found on Snow geese. There was also no rusty stain on the heads of any of the birds. The immatures were mostly white showing a distinctive dusky patch beginning at the base of the bill extending through and behind the eye forming a dusky slash across the face. There were some dusky (grayish) feathers on the crowns of the immatures as well as a dusky patch on their mantles. I did not notice any other dusky markings on the juveniles.

I could not actually see the bluish warty base to the bill, but only that it was dusky. The only pink visible on the bill was near the tip.

Even though the birds eventually landed on the water, they were hard for us to study in detail since they were bobbing up and down on waves facing towards us against the wind. In addition, I could not hold my scope steady on the window mount to view them clearly. However, I was still able to confirm some of my earlier observations such as the rounded unstained heads with dingy stubby bills.

I think hybrid Snow Goose X Ross's Goose can be ruled out because of the comparative uniformity of plumage characteristics and body shapes of individual birds consistent with Ross's Goose

I have found and photographed Ross's Geese at the Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area and have seen and photographed tens of thousands of Snow Geese. I have also made natural mounts and prepared study skins of Snow Geese.

112-01-2003

Ross's Goose (*Chen rossii*)

Number/age: 13 (9 adult, 4 juvenile/1st-winter)

Date: Nov. 13, 2003, ~8:30-9:15 AM

Location: off East Avenue boat launch, also at impoundment adjacent to South Pier, Erie County

Observer: Ben Coulter
3431 Argyle Ave
Erie, PA 16505-1804
814-838-9773
aeridia@velocity.net

Other observers: Jerry McWilliams

Distance to bird: Probably under 100 yards at the closest, about 300 yards when photographed on water

Conditions: Completely overcast, with very strong, gusty winds, and intermittent light snow. A powerful cold front passed through the area the previous night. High 30s.

Optics: Swarovski 8.5x42 binoculars, Leica 77mm APO scope w/ 20-60x eyepiece, Nikon Coolpix 995

Description: The geese were of two different ages, adult and juvenile. Below are separate plumage descriptions of both. All the birds were medium-sized white geese, uniform in size and shape, with black wingtips, small triangular bills, and a vertical border to the facial feathering. They were rather long-winged, and had somewhat short, slender necks. On the water, they were squat and stocky, with short necks and small heads.

The adults were all similar to the following description. The entire head, neck, breast, back, scapulars, belly, flanks, and vent were all clean white, with little to no staining evident on the head. The secondary coverts, axillaries and secondaries were also white, while the primaries were black with whitish upper shafts, creating bold black wingtips visible at very long range. The primary coverts were dusky. The bill, key for distinguishing this species, was small and triangular in shape, cold pinkish-gray, with a slight bluish cast at the base visible at close range. There was no grin patch evident along the tomia, and the border to the facial feathering was vertical. The irises were dark, and the eyes were isolated on the white face. The combination of the dark eye on the white face and the small bill created a "cute" jizz as they flew past. I did not consciously note leg color on either the adult or young birds in flight, and it was not visible when the birds were on the water.

The juvenile birds were off-white on the breast, belly, flanks, and vent, with slight gray washing on the back. The head showed slate gray markings through the lores, and on the nape and crown, but was otherwise white, more so than a juv. Snow Goose would show. The whitish supercilium in particular isolated the dusky eyeline, and created a different look than the darker Snow Goose. The wing coverts and secondaries were white, while the primaries were black, and primary coverts dusky gray. The bills, while the same shape as the adults, were a slate gray color, typical of first year *Chen* geese.

Behavior: The birds were found flying east with a strong west wind at their backs. They circled and acted like they were looking for a sheltered spot to land in the lee of the wind. Eventually, they put down in a shallow, more sheltered impoundment near the south pier, separate from the main lake. They were nervous, and didn't spend more than about

twenty minutes or so on the water before they took off and gained altitude again, apparently resuming migration.

Supporting Evidence: see photographs by Ben Coulter.

Similar species: Snow Goose is the primary confusion species. Snow geese are larger and more robust, with a bulkier bill. On adult Snows, the bill is usually pinkish-orange, with a black grin patch at the border of the mandible and maxilla, giving them a meaner, sneering expression than Ross's. Adult Snow Geese usually show yellowish staining of the head feathers from oxides in the soil, an effect less pronounced on Ross's. Juveniles white-morph Snow Geese have a more extensive gray wash over the head and neck than a Ross's shows, and do not normally show a dark eyeline through the lores. Hybrid Snow x Ross's Geese must also be ruled out. This is intermediate between Snow and Ross's, but still is more heavily built, and larger-billed, usually with a grin patch of variable extent. The likelihood of a pure flock of hybrids is also extremely low.

Discussion: Jerry and I were watching thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls being blown along the lakeshore by the strong west winds. Presque Isle State Park was closed due to wind damage. After seeing these gulls pouring by at Manchester Beach, at the mouth of Walnut Creek, we decided to search out a lee where the gulls may have concentrated, so we made our way over to the East Avenue boat launch.

While there, Jerry called out a flock of 13 Snow Geese, the expected white geese in this part of the state. After checking for smaller individuals (we assumed the birds were Snows) and finding none, we figured there weren't any Ross's and looked elsewhere. The birds circled around in the strong winds, and after about 5 minutes, turned back into the west wind and made a slow pass past the boat launch, much closer than before. Since they were fighting the wind, they flew past slowly, enabling good views. Jerry and I were both stunned by the tiny bills and lack of yellow on the heads. Jerry hopped out of the car and we simultaneously mentioned the small bills and lack of grin patches, and realized they were all Ross's.

We watched the birds fight the wind, until they put down in a small impoundment formed by stone jetties adjacent to the South Pier, about a quarter mile away. We drove over and found the birds on a dirt bank at the edge of the water, but they flushed over to the far side of the impoundment. Winds were very strong outside, gusting to over 50 mph, so I set up my tripod and scope in Jerry's back seat, and took a few movies with my digital camera from inside the car. The quality is poor due to low light and shaking from the wind. After we watched them for a little while, the whole flock took to the air, circled, and headed west into the wind.

Prior experience: I have seen this species once before in Pennsylvania, in Dec 2002, at Peace Valley.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Ross's Goose (Chen rossii)

Date of Sighting: 12 November 2003 to 12 November 2003

Location: EAST AVENUE

County : ERIE

Observer(s): Ben Coulter, Jerry McWilliams

Date of Submission: 2003

Submitted by: Ben Coulter, Jerry McWilliams

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

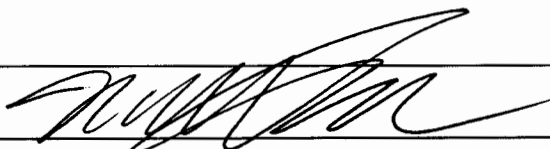
Specimen: No

Recording: Video

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
G. Armistead			X					
D. Heathcote		X						
P. Guris		X						
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer		X						
R. Leberman								
M. Sharp		X						
TOTALS		4	2					
DECISION		X						

Comments: 6/0

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

2/26/05