

Comments on the Parentage of a Hybrid Goose

I read with interest Nancy Bent's article (Bent 1995) on a hybrid goose believed to be a cross between *Branta canadensis* X *Anser albifrons*. I agree with the presumed genera (i.e., *Branta* X *Anser*) involved in the cross but question the selection of the *Anser* species (i.e., Greater White-fronted Goose) and the *Branta* subspecies and suggest other, apparently unconsidered, parentage of the hybrid observed. My reasons for questioning the proposed cross are: (a) observation of free-flying domestic greylag geese (*Anser anser*) in flocks of Canada Geese in the region; (b) apparent domestic characteristics displayed in the hybrid photographs in her article; (c) limited opportunity for *B. c. interior* to pair with Greater White-fronted Geese on the wintering grounds; (d) observations of a similarly appearing family group of hybrids with the parents present; and (e) observations of several similarly appearing birds in flocks of apparent wild/feral giant Canada Geese (*B. c. maxima*).

Free-flying feral domestic geese (*A. anser*) occur with Canada Geese in northeastern Illinois occasionally throughout the year. I have observed greylag geese almost yearly, for the past twenty years, associating with "resident" giant Canada Geese. The occurrence of feral greylag geese suggests another possible parentage of the hybrid goose that may not have been considered by Ms. Bent. Delacour (1964:154-159) discussed the origin and various varieties of domestic waterfowl and hybrids between domestic *A. anser* and *A. cygnoides* (Swan Goose). He reported that these species will hybridize with each other or other species in captivity, including *Branta*. Delacour noted that while the wild ancestors of the domestic greylag goose have orange feet and legs, they arose from wild forms having rosy pink or or-

ange bills and rosy pink feet and legs. Others noted that the greylag and White-fronted Goose's bill color may be pink, orange, yellow, or variably colored depending upon the subspecies/race or age of the bird (Delacour 1954, Johnsgard 1978, Bellrose 1981, Madge and Burn 1988, Kaufman 1994).

The Brookfield goose's pink bill apparently was an important factor for proposing the white-fronted goose as one of the parents involved here. I would suggest that the pink bill color may not necessarily be a good characteristic for species determination. The Greater White-fronted Goose is reported to possess a pink to orange bill (Delacour 1954, Johnsgard 1978, Bellrose 1981, Madge and Burn 1988, Kaufman 1994). A similar range of color is reported for wild greylag geese (Delacour 1954, Johnsgard 1978, Bellrose 1981, Madge and Burn 1988). Kaufman (1994) cautioned on the use of bill color alone to separate races of Greater White-fronted Geese. He cautioned that the description and perceptions of colors among observers may vary greatly and may be influenced by ambient light (early morning and late afternoon contain more red or yellow color and can influence objects' color), quality and type of optics used, and film type. As noted above, bill color among white-fronted geese may be quite variable. I suggest that similar caution might be considered in this case.

Delacour (1964:155) discusses morphological and behavioral changes that occur as wild species are domesticated. These include changes in how the body is carried (i.e. a more upright stance) and development of "pot belly". The hybrid goose pictured in the photograph accompanying Ms. Bent's (1995) article appears to possess both of these subtle domes-

tic characteristics. Female Canada Geese exhibit similar bagginess just before nest initiation and egg laying, but I cannot recall observing geese in this condition during the fall. This suggests to me that a domestic strain may be a parent.

At least three races (subspecies) of Canada Geese may occur in the state of Illinois (Giant=*maxima*, Todd's=*interior*, Lesser/Richardson's=*parvipes/hutchinsi*.) Of these three races, only the small *parvipes/hutchinsi* winters in close association with white-fronted geese. Thus, they would have a greater opportunity to form pair bonds on a common wintering area. This race is among the smallest of the dozen races of Canada Geese. Adults weigh 4-5 lbs. (1.8-2.3 Kg) and frequently are the size of male mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and would not be confused with Todd's or giant races. Todd's race of Canada Geese historically may have wintered along the Gulf coast of Louisiana and Texas, but now winter from northern Alabama, Mississippi, and central Arkansas northward (Bellrose 1981, Trost et al. 1981). Thus, the opportunity for Todd's race to associate with *albifrons* is very limited. Within the past ten years, white-fronted geese have begun moving through Illinois in greater numbers. They even winter irregularly and in small numbers with the majority of Todd's population wintering in southern Illinois. Even though these recent changes provide an opportunity for such cross specific mating to occur, I feel such matings very unlikely.

A much greater opportunity for hybridization occurs between resident giant Canada and domestic greylag geese. Domestic greylag geese frequently are kept and displayed by private and public pond/wetland owners including city parks and children's petting zoos. The year-round asso-

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