

A Barnacle Goose in LaSalle County

with a discussion on provenance of North American and Illinois records

by Michael L. P. Retter

Editor's Note: Richardson's [Cackling] Goose to which the author refers in this article is known to Illinois birders as the "Richardson's" race of the Cackling Goose.

On 1 November 2006 Doug Stotz noticed a large concentration of geese on a borrow pit at the intersection of I-39 and IL-71 in western LaSalle County. Further scrutiny revealed the composition of the flock: 850 Richardson's [Cackling] Geese (*Branta h. hutchinsii*), one immature Ross's Goose (*Chen rossii*), and one adult Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*). Doug made a phone call and had the bird's location promptly posted to IBET, the Illinois birding listserve.

The LaSalle County bird was automatically assumed by many to be an escapee, but I had always been skeptical that all such records should be summarily discounted. I have often wondered why Eurasian Wigeon and other species are readily accepted as wild while Barnacle Geese are not. The next day I chased the bird unsuccessfully. Another attempt the following dawn with Matthew Winks proved fruitful. Not only did we find the Barnacle Goose, but we also discovered a bird that appeared to be a Barnacle X Richardson's Goose hybrid. I was able to get photos of the Barnacle but not the hybrid. Frustratingly, as the overall numbers of geese at the location decreased, the hybrid was never seen again; however, the Barnacle Goose was seen and photographed well by dozens of birders through 7 November 2006. Was the goose a real vagrant or an escapee? We will probably never know for certain, but there are good reasons to consider wild provenance for this bird. I shall outline them below after first providing some background information.

Barnacle Geese are notorious within North American birding circles. They are long-distance migrants that breed in Greenland, so the species is a perfect candidate for natural vagrancy. Unfortunately, they have also been popular with waterfowl collectors. As the New York Records Committee put very succinctly, "The dilemma for any committee is how to know whether a specific individual represents an [escapee] or a genuine vagrant" (<http://www.nybirds.org/NYSARC/Reports/NYSARC2000.html>).



*Barnacle Goose, LaSalle County.
6 November 2006.*

Photo by Peter S. Weber.

Breeding and Migration Status

The Barnacle Goose is a European high Arctic breeder. Three main populations exist. The one breeding in eastern Greenland (from which one might speculate the Illinois bird originated) winters in western Scotland and Ireland. Another breeding on Svalbard (north of Norway) winters on the east coast of Scotland. The most westerly population breeds on Russia's Novaya Zemlya islands and winters in the Netherlands. Since 1975, some former Novaya Zemlya/Netherlands birds started to establish a fourth breeding population in the Baltic Sea.

Richardson's Goose (*Branta h. hutchinsii*) breeds in north-central Arctic Canada from the Northwest Territories across Nunavut and Baffin Island to western Greenland. The breeding population in Greenland is relatively new (Fox et al. 1996; Banks et al. 2004) and has much expanded since 1996. Data from banded Richardson's Geese collected by the Canadian Wildlife Service (<http://www.ofo.ca/cackling/>) indicate that Illinois is directly within the migratory path and wintering range of individuals that breed on Baffin Island (only 200 miles from and the probable origin of the new Greenland population): they primarily use the Mississippi Flyway. Birds that breed further west (such as on Southampton Island and in mainland Nunavut) almost exclusively use the Central (Great Plains) Flyway. Thus, it would seem that most of the Richardson's Geese we see in Illinois breed in the easternmost reaches of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland.

Both Barnacle and Richardson's Geese are experiencing population surges, colonizing new areas in which to breed every year. The Greenland population of Barnacle Goose was estimated at 9,000 birds in 1959, 28,000 in the mid-70s, 33,000 in 2002, and 63,000 by 2006 (Mlodinow & O'Brien 1996, http://www.wwt.org.uk/Research/Monitoring/greenlandbarnacle_latest.asp). The population experienced a sevenfold increase in less than fifty years and doubled in only the last eight. Given the current melting of the Greenland ice sheet, the breed-