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A SIGHT RECORD OF BEAN GOOSE (*Anser fabalis/serrirostris*) IN KANSAS

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ABSTRACT

The Taiga Bean-Goose (*Anser fabalis*) and Tundra Bean-Goose (*Anser serrirostris*) are palearctic geese with established patterns of vagrancy in North America. Here we describe the occurrence of a bean-goose (*Anser fabalis/serrirostris*) in Kansas on 25 January 2014. We presume that it was a naturally occurring vagrant. The Kansas Bird Records Committee (KBRC) has evaluated this record and accepted it as Taiga Bean Goose/Tundra Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis/serrirostris*, Otte 2020).

OBSERVATION

Around 1430 hrs on 25 January 2014, Penner and Rader were birding at the northern end of Minooka Park Recreation Area, located along the south-central shoreline of Wilson Lake, Russell County, Kansas. While Penner was scoping waterfowl, Rader heard a goose call that he was unfamiliar with. He then noticed a single goose in flight approaching their location, which hereafter will be referred to as the Wilson Lake Goose (WLG). Rader alerted Penner to its presence, and both observers were able to observe the WLG in flight and in good light at approximately 55-69 m (60-75 yd) as it passed their location and disappeared to the west. Presumably, it joined a distant, mixed flock of approximately 5,000 Snow Geese (*Anser caerulescens*) and Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) resting on the reservoir. Weather conditions at the time were mostly clear skies with a few high clouds, wind less than 16 km/h (<10 mph), and temperature was about 7.2°C (45°F). Penner and Rader concluded that the WLG was a bean-goose after comparing the plumage characteristics they observed with those of bean-geese and other *Anser* geese in an available field guide. Conclusions about species-level identification were made later,

after researching the vocalizations and physical characteristics of the two bean-goose species. Later that evening, Rader posted a description of their encounter on the Kansas birding listserv with comments on the identification (Rader 2014). A written description was also submitted to the Kansas Bird Records Committee (KBRC # 2014-01) accompanied by a sketch from Penner (Figure 1).

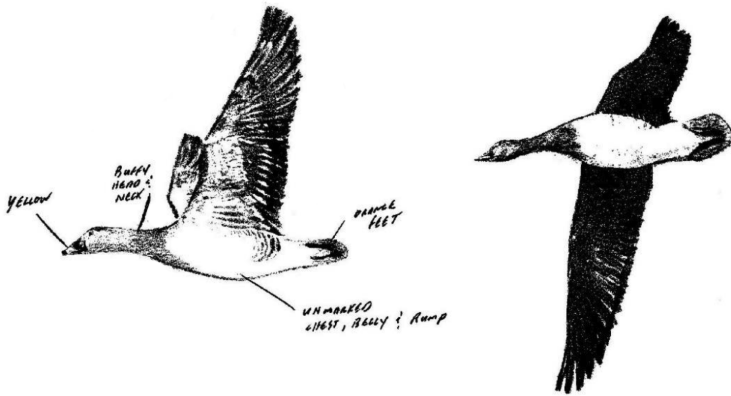


Figure 1. Sketch by RLP of a bean-goose observed at Wilson Lake on 25 Jan 2014. Submitted with report to KBRC (#2014-01). Copyright Robert L. Penner.

Penner and Rader noticed that the WLG was a medium to large goose, superficially resembling the Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*). Its plumage was grayish and brownish overall. The neck was buffy gray in color, the breast appeared lighter gray and the unmarked lower belly appeared whitish. The upperside of the rump featured a white U-shaped band much like that of the Greater White-fronted Goose. The bill was dark overall (basal half and tip) with a prominent yellow distal patch. Structural field marks useful for identification of bean-geese to species were not easily observed given the nature of the encounter. Nonetheless, Penner and Rader noticed that the bill appeared elongated and gently sloping, suggestive of Taiga Bean-Goose. The WLG was heard vocalizing approximately six to eight times and the call was described as a “three-note call”, also like Taiga Bean-Goose.

DISCUSSION

Identification of the WLG as a bean-goose species (*A. fabalis/serrirostris*) is straightforward. In Kansas, only five species of wild geese occur regularly, and of those five, only the Greater White-fronted is similar in appearance to either bean-goose species. Adult Greater White-fronted Geese have white feathering bordering the bill and prominent horizontal barring extending across the belly, both of which were absent in the WLG goose. Immature Greater White-fronted Geese lack these features during their first fall, acquiring them during their first winter. Unlike

the WLG however, which had a mostly dark bill, immature Greater White-fronted Geese have pale pinkish bills. Penner and Rader are very familiar with the Greater White-fronted Goose, having observed millions cumulatively on frequent visits to Cheyenne Bottoms (Barton County), Quivira National Wildlife Refuge (Stafford County), and adjacent areas over several decades. Additional species that might be confused with a bean-geese, all of which are Eurasian, include the Graylag Goose (*Anser anser*), Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*) and Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*). The Greylag Goose is frequently held in captivity and it is possible that an escapee might be confused with a bean-geese except for obvious differences in bill color and plumage. Greylag Geese have entirely pink to orange bills and extensively whitish upperwing and uppertail feathers. The Lesser White-fronted Goose is a declining species with few North American records (Howell et al. 2014) and can be eliminated for the same reasons as the Greater White-fronted Goose. The Pink-footed Goose is an increasingly regular vagrant to Atlantic Canada and the northeastern United States. It bears more similarity to the bean-geese than any other species and is their closest relative (Ruokonen et al. 2014). It can be ruled out based upon pink (not yellow) distal coloration on its bill and pale upperwing coverts which should have been observed if the WLG were that species.

Assignment of the WLG to either species of bean-geese is problematic based upon the limited documentation obtained. Separation of Taiga and Tundra Bean-Geese in the field is difficult. These taxa were considered conspecifics in Europe until the mid-1990s (Sangster and Oreel 1997) and in North America until the mid-2000s (Banks et al. 2007). Their identification is based on subtle differences in bill structure, body proportions, and vocalizations; and is further complicated by geographic variation in both species. The east Eurasian forms of both species are generally larger and longer billed than their western counterparts. For discussion of identification see Cramp and Simmons (1977), Madge and Burn (1988), Oates (1997), Ogilvie and Young (1998), Brown (2010), and Howell et al. (2014).

In reviewing literature on bean-geese vagrancy in North America, it seems that detailed analysis of bill structure from photographs is more-or-less required for species level identification. Even with excellent photographic evidence, identification is not always possible. For example, an individual in California, featured on the cover of *North American Birds* (vol. 65, no. 1), could not be assigned to species with confidence (Nelson et al. 2013). For the above-mentioned reasons, King does not wish to make any assertions about which species the WLG belonged to. Rader and Penner believe that the more elongated and sloping bill they observed, and the vocalizations they heard point towards Taiga Bean-Goose. According to Rader, the vocalization they heard matched recordings of Taiga Bean-Goose on Whatbird (<https://www.whatbird.com>) and Xeno Canto (<https://www.xeno-canto.org>; see XC138989, XC109681, and XC43755).

The KBRC submission for this record was labeled Taiga Bean-Goose, and was initially rejected by the KBRC, partly due to concern that evidence was insufficient for species-level identification (committee comments). Another concern raised by committee members during their initial review of the WLG record was provenance.

Table 1. Known records of bean-geese in North America outside of Alaska. These records are either 1) documented in the literature on bean-geese vagrancy in North America, or 2) documented with photographic evidence in eBird (2020). An October 2010 bean-geese sp. report from Yukon (eBird 2020) lacked publicly accessible evidence and is not listed here.

Taiga Bean-Goose (<i>Anser fabalis</i>)		
Dec. 1984–Jan. 1985	Iowa, Nebraska	Wilson 1985 Wright and Grenon 1985
Oct. 1987	Quebec	Gosselin et al. 1988
Apr. 1998	Nebraska	Silcock and Jorgensen 2018
Dec. 2002	Washington	Mlodinow 2004
May 2014	Yukon	Eckert 2015, eBird 2020
Tundra Bean-Goose (<i>Anser serrirostris</i>)		
Oct. 1982	Quebec	David and Gosselin 1983
Oct. 1999	Yukon	Eckert 2000
Oct. 2013	California	Tietz and McCaskie 2019
Nov.–Dec. 2013	Newfoundland	McLaren 2014
Nov. 2014 – Apr. 2015	Oregon	Oregon Bird Records Committee 2020
Jan. 2018	Arkansas	Cummings 2018 Magnolia Reporter 2018
Nov. 2018–Mar. 2019	Oregon	Oregon Bird Records Committee 2020
Jan. 2019	Alberta	eBird 2020
Apr.–May 2019	Oregon	eBird 2020
Dec. 2019–Mar. 2020	Saskatchewan	eBird 2020
bean-geese sp. (<i>Anser fabalis</i> / <i>serrirostris</i>)		
Nov. 2010–Jan. 2011	California	Nelson et al. 2013

Exotic waterfowl held in captivity periodically escape, meaning that for certain species, it is nearly impossible to distinguish naturally occurring vagrants from escapees. However, in considering provenance, it seems likely that the WLG was a naturally occurring vagrant. First, its occurrence corresponds to the known vagrancy pattern of bean-geese in North America. Apparently, wild bean-geese have been documented in North America outside of Alaska (where regular) and Yukon on at least 17 occasions, both coastally and in the interior (Table 1). Nearly all reviewed records known to us fall between October and April, when bean-geese migrate to lower latitudes in Eurasia. That few have been documented in North America during the warmer months south of Alaska and Yukon is suggestive of natural origin. Moreover, deuterium isotope analysis on a predated Tundra Bean-Goose in Nova Scotia indicated a high latitude origin (McLaren 2014). At present, there are five generally accepted records of Taiga Bean-Goose in North America outside of Alaska, and 10 such records of Tundra Bean-Goose (Table 1). Curiously, eight of those Tundra Bean-Geese have been detected since 2013. Whether vagrancy of this species to North America is increasing, or whether this trend is due to an increase in the number of birders and increased participation in bird information networks remains unclear. In reviewing those bean-geese records from central flyway states, most come from prominent staging or wintering regions for arctic geese (e.g. Rainwater Basin, Missouri Valley, Lower Mississippi Valley). In discussing the occurrence of a Taiga Bean-Goose at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge (Iowa and Nebraska), Wright and Grenon (1985) proposed that a bean-geese in Siberia or Alaska might associate with arctic geese headed for the North American interior much like the Common Crane (*Grus grus*), which occasionally joins Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*) flocks in the central flyway. Others have proposed similar mechanisms for bean-geese vagrancy (Mlodinow 2004; Howell et al. 2014). For further discussion of vagrancy by association, see Howell et al. (2014). A second point in favor of natural occurrence is that in North America, bean-geese are extremely rare in captivity (Wilson 1985; Mlodinow 2014; Howell et al. 2014). A search of the Species360 database (<https://www.species360.org/>, on 20 March 2019) for records of captive bean-geese in North America failed to return any.

In addition to the WLG, there are two earlier reports of bean-geese from Kansas conforming to the previously described pattern of vagrancy apparent in the central flyway. The first was an individual at Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area on 14 Mar 1990, observed by Phillip C. Wedge, alongside Snow and Canada Geese. Believing that individual to have been an escapee, no effort was made to document the observation (Wedge pers. comm.). The second report also comes from Cheyenne Bottoms approximately 10-12 years ago when Ted. T. Cable observed an apparent bean-geese amongst Greater White-fronted Geese. Unfortunately, those geese were flushed by a helicopter before additional observers arrived and before documentation could be obtained (Cable pers. comm.). We submitted a draft of this paper to KBRC since we addressed the aforementioned provenance concerns. KBRC subsequently reevaluated the record and accepted it as “Taiga Bean Goose/Tundra Bean Goose” (Otte 2020).

In summary, there is convincing evidence that a bean-geese was 1) observed at Wilson Lake, and 2) that it was a naturally occurring vagrant. At present, data on vagrancy of bean-geese in North America is limited and all records are noteworthy. We encourage birders in Kansas and adjacent areas to keep the possibility of future occurrences of bean-geese in mind, especially in areas where large concentrations of arctic geese occur. Also, obtaining the best possible documentation of structure (especially head, bill, and neck) and vocalizations is essential for conclusive documentation.

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