



A Ross's Goose (left) enjoys a Thanksgiving meal with a Snow Goose



The blue morph of the Snow Goose with a Canada Goose

Brunswick Wildlife Holiday Geese

No, put down the baster and step back from the geese. Two white geese...the Ross's Goose and Snow Goose (*Chen* genus)...showed up in Brunswick County over the holidays but only for their golf course meals not ours.

In the photo with both species, the Ross's is smaller and has a small, stubby bill compared to the Snow Goose. The Snow Goose has a dark cutting edge on its bill called a "grin patch". It appears to be grinning. The photo was taken behind the clubhouse at Brick Landing Plantation on Goose Creek Road over the Thanksgiving weekend.

The Ross's is rare in our area. The most recent records I found were sightings in Southport in January 2002 and Myrtle Beach in January 2004. There was a Ross's sighting at Sunset Beach Twin Lakes a week or so after I took this photo but I believe it was the same bird.

Snow Geese are semi-rare in our area; however, tens of thousands overwinter in our state in locations like Pocosin Lakes, Lake Mattamuskeet, Alligator River, and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuges. However, last winter a solitary Snow Goose foraged in the vicinity of the intersection of US 17 and NC 211 for several weeks.

There are two subspecies of Snow Geese...the Lesser and Greater Snow Goose. There are two populations of Lesser Snow Geese, the western and mid-continent populations that breed from central northern Canada to the Bering Straits.

Eastern Snow Geese are the Greater subspecies, breeding from the coast of Baffin Island on the Arctic Circle, Ellesmere Island near the North Pole, and the west coast of Greenland. They overwinter on the coast from New Jersey to North Carolina.

Let's play bird detective and identify the birds in the photos given the three possibilities above. Not so fast! There are actually six possibilities.

Polymorphism means that two or more distinctive morphs occur within a species of animal. More specifically the Ross's, Lesser, and Greater are all dimorphic since they have just two plumage color morphs...a light or white morph and a dark or blue morph.

The blue morph, which is fairly common in the Lesser, is rare in the Greater, representing under four percent of the population. Blue morph geese tend to mate with blues and whites tend to mate with whites. White and blue morph birds do interbreed and the offspring may be of either morph.

The blue morph's color is determined by a single gene which is dominant over the white one; therefore, if a blue goose mates with a white goose, the offspring will all be blue. If two white geese mate, they have only white offspring. If two blue geese that had a combination of parents mate, they will have mostly blue offspring, but may also have white offspring.

We know we have three of the six possibilities...a Ross's plus white and blue morph Snow Geese but we do not know whether we have one or both subspecies of Snow Goose. Incidentally, the photo of the blue morph, once considered a separate species called the Blue Goose, was taken on Christmas Eve in Brunswick Forest.

Is the blue morph likely a Lesser since the blue morph in the Greater is rare and the blue morph in the Lesser is fairly common in the eastern half of the country? Since the white morph snow goose was hanging out with a Ross's Goose, is it likely a Lesser since the Ross's normally prefer the company of the Lesser and sometimes they interbreed? Since the Lesser is generally the smaller of the two subspecies can we use size to differentiate the subspecies?

Unfortunately, we cannot make these assumptions and, since overlaps in size occur, the subspecies is not identifiable in the field by size. We're toast! Our goose is cooked! We cannot reach a conclusion about the subspecies of Snow Geese.

Well, this has been an exercise in futility...er...the intricacies of bird biology and identification. Speaking of conservation...

I wish I had a good segue into the subject of conservation; however, I will not let that stop me. I believe that in 2007 "going green" reached a tipping point in the minds of Americans. We are no where near defining all that it means. For me, for now, it means reducing my "carbon footprint". My New Year's resolution is to decrease it by twenty percent.

I have no idea if that arbitrary number is achievable; however, I had to start somewhere. My simple plan: change the water filter on my refrigerator and give up bottled water, combine trips and make at least one less per week, and finish replacing my standard light bulbs with mini-florescent bulbs. New Year's resolutions that are simple to implement stand a good chance of making it. It is not too late for you to also make a green resolution.

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