

3. CACKLING AND CANADA GOOSE IDENTIFICATION

Cackling Goose (Cackler)

Description

- Very small goose, similar to the size of a mallard, slightly larger.
- Breast dark brown, sometimes with a white neck ring. Juveniles are generally lighter in color. If collared, the collar is yellow.
- Culmen (bill) length of less than 32 mm. Head appears “puffy.”
- Vocalizations are high-pitched yelps.
- Fast wing beat in comparison to larger subspecies.



Figure 2: Cackling goose.



Figure 3: An adult cackling goose with a white neck ring.



Figure 4: A group of cackling goose adults (darker-colored birds) and juveniles (lighter-colored birds).



Figure 5: Yellow-collared adult cackling goose with other adults.



Figure 6: Large groups of cackling geese showing darker color variations in different light conditions.



Figure 7: Darker and lighter cackling geese.



Figure 8: Cackling geese on a sunny day; notice stubby neck and bill as well as dark brown breast.



Figure 9: Cackling geese in close; in this situation, vocalization and whether or not stubby features are present can be the key to proper identification.



Figure 10: Cackling goose in flight; notice stubby neck and bill.



Figure 11: Cackling geese in flight; notice dark breast, which has little contrast with neck color.



Figure 12: Flock of cackling geese; notice color variations and white neck rings



Figure 13: Alert cackling geese; notice wide contrast in color variations



Figure 14: Cackling goose; notice stubby neck and culmen (bill)



Figure 15: Cackling geese in flight



Figure 16: Cackling goose in flight; notice length of wings in contrast to the body.



Figure 17: Flock of cackling geese landing.



Figure 18: Cackling geese taking flight; notice the length of wings, which are very long and not in proportion to the body.



Figure 19: Cackling geese in flight.



Figure 20: Cackling geese typically fly in large flocks.

Distribution

Cackling geese breed in western Alaska (Figure 21) in a narrow fringe along the coast, mainly between the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. They migrate to the Pacific Northwest to winter.



Figure 21: Distribution of cackling geese.

History

Numbers of this subspecies dropped precipitously from about 400,000 in the late 1960s to fewer than 25,000 in the mid-1980s. The decline is believed to be due to a combination of subsistence harvest in Alaska and sport harvest on the wintering grounds, mainly in California.

The cackler was an infrequent resident in the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River before the 1990s, previously spending winters in the Central Valley of California. Ninety-five percent of the cackler's population now winters in this region. Large swings in population size have occurred, with as many as 400,000 cacklers existing in the late 1960s to a low of about 20,000 birds in the mid 1980s. Their shift to the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River occurred as the population rebounded from the low numbers of the 1980s, and by 1997 there were about 200,000 geese wintering here. Since that time, the population has experienced a downward trend and in recent years the number of cackling geese has been stable at 150,000. This is the one subspecies that has contributed to an overall increase of wintering geese in this region during recent years.

Behavior

Cacklers typically fly in groups of 40 or more birds. They prefer wide-open areas such as large grass fields and open sheet water but have adapted to urban park habitats in Salem and Portland, Oregon. They are very wary and tend to fly higher than other subspecies.

Management

The flyway population goal for this goose is 250,000. While production on the breeding grounds may vary from year to year, it is likely that predation, subsistence harvest, and sport harvest in Alaska, Washington, and Oregon influence population growth the most.

Subsistence harvest, the taking of animals by native peoples for food and survival, is an important cultural need in some regions of Canada and Alaska. This practice is recognized by wildlife management agencies, and cooperative agreements are important to protect shared wildlife populations. The cackler is one subspecies taken in substantial numbers by subsistence hunters on the Yukon-Kuskokwim (Y-K) Delta of western Alaska. The Y-K Delta Goose Management Plan, signed by all coastal states, the USFWS, and Alaskan subsistence hunters, calls for restrictions on both the breeding and wintering grounds to protect cackling,

white-fronted, emperor, and black brant geese. State and federal harvest management for all geese on the wintering grounds must be weighed against the needs of subsistence users.

Future

With careful management, the future of the cackler is considered bright, and the population should increase toward flyway objectives. Management approaches are taking into account the need for fair and equitable bag limits among all users on the breeding and wintering grounds. Cackler management will continue to be complex as managers try to reach the population objective, balance sport hunting opportunities and harvest by subsistence hunters, and reduce agricultural depredation (crop damage) in Oregon and Washington.