

Identification Field Guide to the Geese of the Willamette Valley and Lower Columbia River

Second Edition



Kelly Warren

Wild Spirit Resources LLC

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to the Geese of the Willamette Valley
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Dedication: Dr. Charles Edward Warren

This guide is dedicated to my grandfather and friend Dr. Charles Edward Warren. From the beginning of his life till the end, he lived in the outdoors, hunting, fishing and taking care of nature and its splendor. He never left a job unfinished. He made a difference through his hundreds of students or anyone who had a chance to meet him. This is to the man who knew what was right in nature and the world. He was the one who taught me all that I know about nature. His character, exuberance, lessons, and passion for family, students and nature will never be forgotten.

Photo and Illustration Credits

All photos and illustrations by Kelly Warren except:

- Figure 1 by Dan Portman, based on a map by Pacific Flyway Council
- Figures 45, 46 and 110 courtesy of Dave Smith Decoys
- Figures 22 courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Figure 62 courtesy of Bryan Stone
- Figure 107 courtesy of Evan Alcantara
- Figure 127 courtesy of Brad Cochran

1. INTRODUCTION

Oregon's Willamette Valley and the lower Columbia River region of both Oregon and Washington host seven subspecies of cackling and Canada Geese as well as other species of geese:

- Cackling goose (*Branta hutchinsii minima*)
- Aleutian goose (*B. hutchinsii leucopareia*)
- Taverner's goose (*B. hutchinsii taverneri*)
- Lesser Canada goose (*B. canadensis parvipes*)
- Dusky Canada goose (*B. canadensis occidentalis*)
- Vancouver Canada goose (*B. canadensis fulva*)
- Western Canada goose (*B. canadensis moffitti*)
- Greater white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons*)
- Lesser snow goose (*Chen caerulescens caerulescens*)

For clarity and simplicity, this field guide generally references common names for the goose subspecies rather than their official species and subspecies designations.

The Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River are included in a special management zone (Figure 1) created in 1986 by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Pacific Flyway Council, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), primarily to protect the dusky Canada goose (dusky), whose population had declined significantly from historical

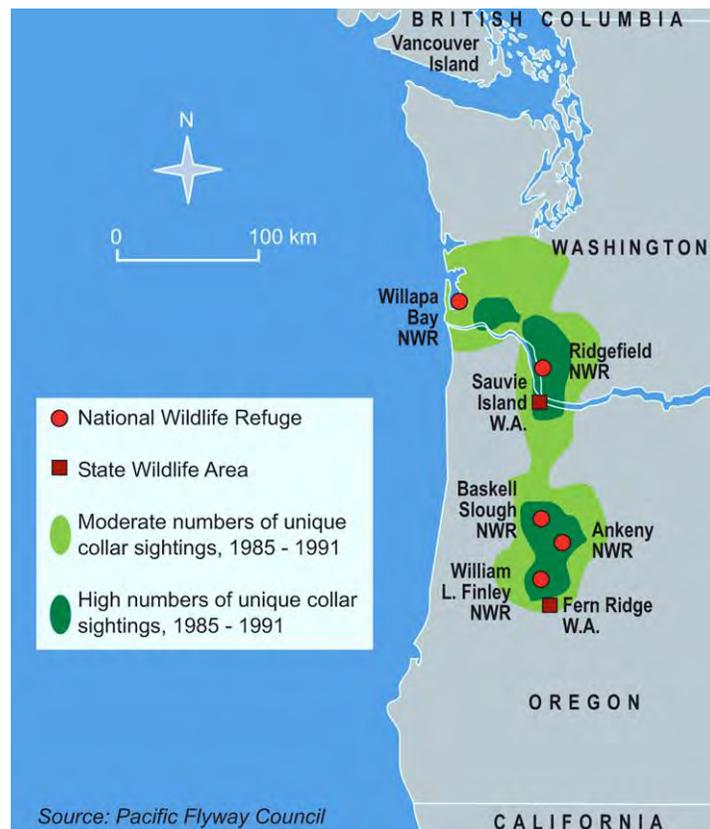


Figure 1: Winter use areas of dusky Canada geese.

levels. In this field guide, this special management zone is referred to as the “Permit Zone.” At the time of creation of the Permit Zone, the Taverner’s and lesser goose, as well as other Canada goose populations, were becoming more numerous in the region. Regulations exist to minimize the harvest of dusky while supporting harvest of more abundant geese. Some legal geese, however, are easily confused in the field with the dusky. Hunters are required to take an examination to test their ability to identify the various goose species and subspecies before receiving a permit to hunt within the Permit Zone. Only hunters who successfully pass the examination with a score of at least 80% will receive a permit to hunt geese in the Permit Zone.

Farmers, waterfowl hunters, and wildlife managers in the Permit Zone are faced with problems for which there are no simple solutions. Several factors have combined to create almost unsolvable difficulties:

- Abundant numbers of Canada geese depredate (damage) agricultural crops and pastures during winter and spring months.
- Some subspecies of geese that make up the wintering population require special protection and management efforts to help them recover.
- Many subspecies look generally alike. This creates difficulty for hunters who are asked to harvest some subspecies but not others, and an equally difficult problem for wildlife managers who must regulate hunting to ensure protection for subspecies that need special consideration.

The hunting program in the Permit Zone has been successful in helping to conserve the dusky by educating hunters to recognize and harvest other subspecies. This is especially important in the face of ongoing agricultural crop depredation caused by large numbers of wintering geese. From 1985/86 to the 2014/15 waterfowl season harvested geese were brought to an ODFW or WDFW check stations to allow personnel to determine the subspecies. Check station personnel measured various parameters including age, sex, tarsus (leg) length, culmen (bill) length, and color. A classification of a dusky is based on a legal definition based on breast color and culmen length.

New regulations for the 2015/16 season no longer require hunters to bring harvested birds to check stations. However, Dusky Canada geese are now illegal to shoot in all of NW Oregon, making proper identification even more important. Classification of dusky geese will

be done by law enforcement in the field. If a hunter harvests a goose and law enforcement determines it is a dusky the hunter will be issued a citation and lose their permit for the remainder of the hunting season. Please see the regulations for more details on the changes to goose hunting in NW Oregon. Unfortunately, some lines among the subspecies in nature are blurred. Use of strict identification parameters can result in the inclusion of geese that are not dusks in the dusky category. But vice versa, some dusks are classified as other subspecies. Some hunters who shoot dusks do not lose their hunting privileges because the birds may fall under the western or Taverner's/lesser definition. However, in all training and educational materials, hunters are asked to not shoot the larger, dark-colored birds that may be dusks. Hunters are also advised not shoot a goose whenever in doubt about identification.

This guide is aimed at providing hunters and other interested persons with useful tools in identifying the various species and subspecies of geese in the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River. This guide should also be used in conjunction with annual hunting regulations for the Permit Zone published by ODFW and WDFW. If the hunting community can prove its ability to show restraint, take the time to learn goose identification in the field, and follow all regulations, we can assist in controlling goose populations and conserving subspecies of special concern. This is definitely a win-win situation. To take these issues lightly will mean failure and the reduction or loss of hunter opportunity in the future. All of us are important partners in these management endeavors.

2. IDENTIFICATION PARAMETERS

Geese vary widely in their body size, wing shape, body length, color, and bill (culmen) length. ODFW, WDFW, and the USFWS have established a set of parameters for identification of dusky Canada geese based on breast plumage color and culmen length. A goose is considered to be a dusky if the plumage color matches a five or less on the Munsell soil color chart, **and** has a 40 to 50 mm culmen length. In addition, a cackling goose is determined by a culmen length of less than 32 mm. Other size, length, and color parameters are presented in the individual subspecies descriptions in this field guide.

Biologists have put plastic colored neck collars with identifying codes on some geese. Collar color has been standardized to allow biologists to easily identify the subspecies and where the bird was collared. Collar colors seen in the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River are as follows: green or red (dusky), blue or grey (Aleutian goose, lesser Canada goose), yellow (cackling goose), white or black (western Canada goose).

Hunters must be able to identify geese both on the ground and in the air. Birds silhouetted against the sky or in different lighting can appear to be much darker or lighter than their typical color. This guide includes pictures of birds in both circumstances to aid in identification. In addition, the guide presents pictures of mixed flocks of geese to allow the reader to distinguish among the species and subspecies.

Hunters Tips

- Dusky's tend to fly low and drop right into decoys, so be aware if you see this behavior.
- Let birds get close. Birds at a distance are more difficult to identify. Use binoculars as geese approach to assist you in proper identification.
- Look for geese with a distinct break between the black neck and breast feathers.
- Pay attention to differences in wing shape and neck length.
- Listen to voice differences in the larger and smaller subspecies.
- If there is any question of the subspecies do not shoot.
- If a bird is collared look for yellow, white or blue and avoid red.
- It may be beneficial for hunters to target cackling geese to avoid making mistakes on medium/large Canada geese that may have characteristics/features of Dusky's.
- Be careful of mixed flocks and make sure you identify the solitary bird you are shooting at.
- Remember that all geese may have a white neck ring, ranging from a few white feathers to a complete ring. Therefore, you must consider all identification factors including behavior, voice, color, and size.
- Culmen (bill) length is a way to identify geese in hand but is not a reliable way to identify geese in flight. The techniques listed above are the best way to identify geese in flight.
- Review this field guide and regulation materials regularly.