Field identification of grey geese

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INTRODUCTION

Observers of grey geese Anser spp fall into two main categories. Firstly there are those fortunates who live near or regularly visit areas where large flocks of one or more species winter. For them the initial recognition of the species involved will rarely be difficult; their concern will be over the finding of the scattered individuals of other kinds of geese that may be present in the flock. The second and far larger group of observers is composed of those who have an often fleeting view of a single bird or a small flock of grey geese well away from normal haunts. In such encounters there is no ready comparison to hand and frequently no second chance to see the birds in the absence of traditional feeding or roosting sites in the area.

As with most identification problems, there is no real substitute for prolonged observation of the difficult species in all possible combinations of background, lighting and behaviour. Although it is theoretically possible to achieve this fairly easily within Britain and Ireland for some grey geese, others are very local in their distribution or occur only as vagrants. We therefore hope that this short paper will help all observers, but particularly those in the second category outlined above. This is not the last word on the subject; that can never be written. The far-off bird disappearing rapidly into the darkening gloom of a winter afternoon will always have to go down as 'unidentified grey goose'.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PLUMAGE AND BARE PARTS

A very brief summary is followed by a fairly detailed plumage and bare-part description for each of the eight forms of grey geese that have been recorded in the wild in Britain and Ireland.* Details of plumage common to all are omitted. In all cases it is possible to age the geese, at least in the first part of the winter. In some the first-year plumage becomes virtually indistinguishable from that of the adult soon after the New Year, though in others it remains distinct until the spring departure. In either case fairly good viewing conditions are required for successful ageing. As well as showing plumage differences, young geese also tend to look scraggy, and thinner and less well groomed than adults. It is also true of all geese that the male tends to be larger and to have a larger head than the

*The Snow Goose A. caerulescens, which may be considered an aberrant grey goose, is not included in this paper. The European records up to the end of 1968, and the escape problem, were discussed in Brit. Birds, 64: 398, 402-405

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female. Both sexing and ageing of goose in the field are made easier by the maintenance of the family bond throughout the first winter of the juveniles' life. Thus it is quite easy to pick out family units of male and female parents plus from one to four or five (rarely more) young birds, moving together within the general motion of a feeding flock. Sexing and, to some extent, ageing of single geese is possible with experience. The numbers in brackets after each of the headings that follow refer to the figures on pages 60-61.

Western Bean Goose *Anser fabalis fabalis* (3, 4, 5)
A large, tall, rather long-billed and long-necked, essentially brown goose, with a very dark head and neck.

*Adult:* Head and neck dark brown, almost black on forehead; entire upperparts rather uniform dull brown, feathers tipped buff forming transverse pattern; upper-tail-coverts white, contrasting with ash-brown back and tail, latter with white rim. Chest buff-brown, merging with brown (indistinctly banded darker brown) flanks and belly; upper flanks edged white, forming obvious line. Some adults have white feathering across top and down sides of base of upper mandible. Upperwing lacks distinct pattern, with coverts similar in tone to upperparts and contrasting only slightly with dull black quills.

Bill rather heavy and long, with upper mandible almost straight-edged and noticeable gape; orange-yellow with varying amount of black extending from base, yellow sometimes restricted to small patch behind black nail. Legs and feet orange-yellow or orange. Eyes brown, with no ring.

*First winter:* As adult but duller; transverse pattern on closed wings and back indistinct due to incomplete buff tips to feathers. Orange-yellow of bill, legs and feet dull. Distinctions become less obvious from January onwards.

Russian Bean Goose *Anser fabalis rossicus*
As nominate race but smaller, shorter-necked and shorter-billed.

*Adult and first winter:* As Western Bean Goose, but orange-yellow on bill restricted to narrow band across bill behind black nail. Bill less heavy or long, with steeper angle between upper mandible and forehead.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus* (3, 4, 5)
A medium-sized, rather compact, short-billed and short-necked, essentially pinkish-brown goose, with a darker round head and fore-neck, and grey forewing obvious in flight.

*Adult:* Head and upper neck dark brown, lower neck paler brown; upperparts pinkish-grey, increasingly separated lines of feathers tipped brownish-white forming regular transverse pattern; tertials and inner secondaries brownish-grey edged greyish-white; uppertail-coverts white, contrasting with ash-grey centre to back and dark grey, white-rimmed tail. Chest pinkish-brown, merging with brown (faintly and irregularly banded buff) flanks and belly; upper flanks edged white, forming obvious line. Some adults have white feathering across top and down sides of base of upper mandible. Upperwing shows distinct pattern, ash-grey primary and secondary coverts contrasting with brownish-black quills. Coverts can look 'purplish' in dull light.

Bill light and short, usually with upper mandible slightly concave in outline; pink with varying amount of blackish-brown extending from base, pink sometimes
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restricted to small patch behind black nail. Legs and feet cold flesh- or bluish-pink. Eyes dark brown, with no ring.

First winter: Darker than adult, with less pink or grey tone; more mottled, less neat appearance due to incomplete feather-tip colours, particularly on wing-coverts and mantle, and often with ochre legs and feet. Becomes less easy to distinguish as winter progresses.

European White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons albifrons* (1, 2, 4, 5)

A medium-sized, rather angular, deep-chested, square-headed, essentially greyish-brown goose, with (in the adult) a white forehead and black bars on the underparts.

*Adult:* Full feather surround to bill base (and rarely forecrown) white; head, neck and upperparts greyish-brown, increasingly separated lines of feathers finely tipped brownish-white forming transverse pattern; uppertail-coverts white, contrasting with dusky centre to back and dusky, white-rimmed tail. Chest buffish-brown, often looking noticeably pale and contrasting with greyish-brown flanks and belly, strongly but variably barred and blotched with black; upper flanks edged white, forming particularly obvious line on darker birds. Upperwing lacks obvious pattern, since coverts dusky grey and not contrasting with greyish-black quills.

Bill not heavy, but quite long, with upper mandible slightly concave in outline; normally pink with white nail but some show orange tinge near nail. Legs and feet orange. Eyes dark hazel, with narrow spectacle of buffish-grey orbital skin usually invisible in field.

*First winter:* Distinct from adult, lacking white forehead and markedly variegated plumage; browner and more mottled, without any black bars underneath; can be confused with Greylag *A. anser*. White forehead appears during first winter, but black bars on underparts lacking or incomplete until second autumn. Bill, legs and feet as in adult but duller.

Greenland White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons flavirostris*

Similar to nominate race but darker and more olive in tone; black barring on underparts often more extensive.

*Adult:* Averages 5% larger than European Whitefront, with plumage generally darker, marked olive tone to brown pigment, duller chest and greater extent of black barring underneath, though some of nominate race can be as dark. White on forehead generally less extensive and often with surround of dark feathers.

Bill longer and heavier, orange-yellow with white nail. Legs and feet orange.

*First winter:* As first-winter European Whitefront but darker, duskier and more olive.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* (1, 2)

A small, rounded, dainty, small-billed and small-headed, essentially dusky-brown goose, with an extensive white forehead and forecrown (in the adult), a yellow eye-ring and uniform, almost immaculate plumage.

*Adult:* Wide feather surround to bill base, and most of forecrown (to above eye), white; rest of head and body uniform dusky-brown, upperparts showing only dull transverse lines. Underparts with white flank edge, delicate paler brown banding, and black bars on lower flanks and belly centre; rest of plumage as in Whitefront.
Fig. 1. Lesser Whitefront *Anser erythropus* (second from right) with family of European Whitefronts *A. albifrons albifrons*. Note former's daintier appearance, with noticeably rounded head, long wings and nimbler gait. Note also how variably plumage of grey geese catches light.

Fig. 2. Further comparison of Lesser Whitefronts *Anser erythropus* with European Whitefronts *A. albifrons albifrons*: left, immatures, Lesser (in front) showing dark, immaculate plumage, daintier appearance, long wings, small bill, and eye-ring; centre, heads of typical adults, Lesser (on left) distinguished by small bill, large white blaze on head and brilliant yellow eye-ring (but note thin dull eye-ring visible on 20% of European Whitefronts); right, immatures taking off, Lesser again showing generally daintier and darker appearance. All size differences shown are extreme.

Fig. 3. Western Bean Goose *Anser fabalis fabalis* (right) with party of Pinkfeet *A. brachyrhynchus*. Note former's longer bill, head and neck, darker plumage, and greater overall bulk compared with dainty but rather dumpy appearance of Pinkfeet.
Fig. 4. Silhouettes of (left to right) Greylag *Anser anser*, Bean *A. fabalis*, Pinkfoot *A. brachyrhynchus* and Whitefront *A. albifrons*. Note general bulk (especially at rear) of Greylag; long bill, head and neck of Bean; relative roundness and small head of Pinkfoot; and rather angular appearance and square head of Whitefront.

Fig. 5. Appearance in flight of (left to right) Greylag *Anser anser*, Bean *A. fabalis*, Pinkfoot *A. brachyrhynchus* and Whitefront *A. albifrons*. Note very pale forewing of Greylag; dark head, neck and forewing of Bean; dark head, pale chest and forewing of Pinkfoot; and barred underparts and dull forewing of Whitefront.

[continued from page 59]

Bill light and small, almost triangular in shape; bright pink with white nail. Legs and feet orange. Eyes dark brown, set off by swollen spectacle of brilliant yellow orbital skin.

*First winter*: Lacks white front of head, black bars on underparts and transverse lines on upperparts, but already shows yellow eye-ring. During winter some white may appear, but not black barring.

**Western Greylag Goose** *Anser anser anser* (4, 5)

A large, heavy, big-headed, rather thick-necked, essentially grey goose, with a strikingly pale forewing obvious in flight.

*Adult*: Head and neck pale buffish-grey, darker on crown and along lines of indented feathers falling diagonally across sides of neck; upperparts brownish-grey, increasingly separated lines of feathers finely but noticeably tipped buffish-white forming regular transverse pattern; tertials and inner secondaries also brownish-grey broadly edged buffish-white; uppertail-coverts white contrasting with grey centre to back and grey, white-rimmed tail. Chest pale buffish-grey, merging with grey (mottled white and buff) flanks and belly, latter with varying area of black spots or blotches (not forming bars); upper flanks increasingly edged white towards vent, forming obvious line, and rear flank feathers with blackish centres, appearing as irregular barring on well-marked birds. Upperwing shows striking pattern, pale blue-grey primary and secondary coverts contrasting with greyish-black quills.
Bill quite heavy and strong, essentially triangular in shape, with upper mandible lacking concave outline; pale orange, with pink tinge showing behind white nail. Legs and feet warm pink. Eyes brown, with spectacle of orange orbital skin.

First winter: More mottled, lacking particularly adult's sharply defined transverse lines on upperparts, obvious flank edges and belly marks. Bill and legs duller pink, sometimes grey-pink. Distinctions from adult become less marked after New Year.

Eastern Greylag Goose Anser anser rubrirostris
As nominate race, but paler and with longer bill.

Adult: Slightly larger and paler than Western Greylag, with whitish tones replacing buff, particularly on head and neck (both appearing uniform) but also on upperparts (feather edges greyish-white forming stronger transverse pattern) and flanks. Forewing even paler, appearing whitish-grey in some lights.

Bill longer, wholly pink except for white nail. Legs and feet cold pink.

First winter: As first-winter Western Greylag, but paler and with longer bill.

SIZE AND SHAPE
The Greylag (both races) is the largest and bulkiest of the grey geese. It has a broad, deep body, a proportionately rather short, thick neck, and a noticeably large head made more prominent by the heavy bill. Although both Beans and both Whitefronts can be as tall and long as the Greylag, their bodies are much slimmer, especially towards the tail, their necks longer, their heads smaller, and their bills, though they can be as long, much less heavy.

The Pinkfoot is a well-rounded bird, almost dumpy at times, with a relatively short neck and small head. Although as long as many Whitefronts, it is not as tall. In comparison with the Bean, it is much more compact and smaller in every way; in particular the head and bill are less elongated.

Although the Lesser Whitefront is normally a much smaller goose than any of the others, there is in fact some overlap between large specimens and small individuals of the European Whitefront, the species with which it most often occurs in Britain. In searching through a flock of the latter, size alone is no criterion for a Lesser Whitefront. The very small steep bill and small rounded head are distinctly different, however; and as in no other grey goose, except a few Whitefronts, the folded wings project well beyond the tail.

FLIGHT
Only the Greylag and Pinkfoot have an obvious upperwing pattern, the other species showing little or no upperwing contrast. The pale blue-grey upperwing-coverts of the Greylag contrast sharply with the greyish-black quills to produce a really prominent pale grey wing flash, much more conspicuous at all times than the darker grey forewing of the Pinkfoot. The silhouette of the Greylag shows its large head and thick neck, very different from the short-necked, round-
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headed Pinkfoot. In addition the Greylag has a rather laboured wing beat compared with the fluid, buoyant flight of the Pinkfoot. Although all the grey geese 'whiffle' (tumble over on their sides or even upside-down), the Pinkfoot's aerobatics are perhaps the most dramatic.

The flight silhouette of the rather uniformly dark Bean Goose shows the noticeably long thin neck and long head which should distinguish it fairly readily from the also uniform Whitefront. In particular, the Greenland race of the latter can look very evenly dark in flight, though overhead the belly bars of both races should show up. The Whitefront, and again more particularly the Greenland race, has longer, narrower wings than the other grey geese.

There are no hard and fast rules about the way the different species fly in flocks. It depends largely on how far they are intending to fly, and on the wind strength and direction. In general, however, the Pinkfoot and Greylag more readily adopt the familiar 'V' formation if only because they habitually flight further than the others between roosting and feeding sites. Whitefronts often proceed in quite dense bunches without coherent shape, or sometimes in long straggling lines.

**Voice**

There is one major difficulty in using calls to identify the species. A lone goose probably does not call very often, or uses only the distress note, while a single bird in a flock of another species would rarely be audible. Only *en masse* is the true goose voice heard and then it is less easy to describe than the individual calls of which it is composed.

The most readily recognisable call is probably that of the Greylag. Both individually and in a flock, Greylags sound very like their domestic descendants, farmyard geese. A deep, sonorous, somewhat vulgar, cackling 'aahng-aahng-aahng', usually trisyllabic, is most characteristic, and is heard both on the ground and in the air. Close to a flock, one may also hear a multisyllabic buzzing call which, together with the cackle, gives the flock chorus a distinctly more bass, less far-carrying, sound than that of the other species.

In contrast, the Pink-foot has a high-pitched, disyllabic 'wink-wink', occasionally 'wink-wink-wink', as well as a three-note cackle 'ahng-ahng-ahng', higher than the equivalent Greylag call. The flock chorus is distinctly higher-pitched, more urgent and more penetrating than that of any other species.

The Bean Goose also has a double 'wink-wink' note akin to the Pinkfoot's, but it is lower and fuller in tone, more tenor than treble, while the flock chorus is an even lower (closer to a baritone), broader sound than the Pinkfoot's, though less deep than the Greylag's.

There are no apparent differences between the notes of the two
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Whitefront races. The main call is a two-note ‘kow-yow’, producing a more musical effect than the calls of the other species and lacking their nasal tone. Of all the grey geese, this species produces a flock sound most like a pack of dogs. In flight there is a high laughing call ‘lyo-lyok’, usually quite liquid and musical but sometimes sounding harsher and more metallic. The flock sound is essentially contralto, more querulous than those of the other species. Feeding flocks often produce a loud buzzing sound, made particularly during aggressive displays between family parties.

The Lesser Whitefront can be picked out by an experienced ear from a flying group of European Whitefronts. Its calls are similar to those of the larger bird but much more high-pitched and squeaky.

First-winter birds of all species often do not attain a mature voice until well on in the winter. The most extraordinary squeaks and half-formed cackles may come from their throats, analogous to the breaking voice of a youth.

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR

Although all the species feed on land, where they have rather similar gait and postures, their feeding actions are all slightly different, the larger species in general walking more slowly and pecking at a slower rate than the smaller. Thus in a flock of geese it is often possible to pick out a stranger by the different rate at which it is moving in relation to the rest of the birds. The best example of this is the detection of Lesser Whitefronts in flocks of European Whitefronts. The Lesser Whitefront walks much more rapidly and pecks at a much faster rate than the Whitefronts, and watching for this behaviour is often the quickest way of spotting one of the former.

DISTRIBUTION, STATUS AND HABITAT

The purpose of this section is to give a baseline of probability against which to judge a sighting of grey geese in Britain and Ireland. Obviously vagrants can turn up almost anywhere, and the rearing and release of birds by wildfowlers are producing some anomalies, but the regular wintering populations are highly traditional in their ranges and habitats, and major deviations are rare.

Bean Goose

The taxonomy of the Bean Goose is anything but clear, but there seems to be general agreement that two races occur in Britain, though there may be intergrades between them. The Western Bean is a regular wintering species in small numbers, usually under 100, at two sites, in Norfolk and Galloway. The birds receive some protection at both places but, in view of the decline in their numbers that has taken place in recent years and their vulnerability to dis-
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turbance, we take this opportunity of urging restraint on the part of
birdwatchers wishing to see them. Elsewhere there are occasional
records of singles or small flocks, particularly from Northumberland
and Grampian where they are almost regular, but virtually any­
where is possible, though Irish records are rare. The normal habitat
of the regular flocks is inland wet grassland. They do not usually
arrive before mid-December, and depart in March.

The Russian Bean Goose occurs only as a vagrant, most often in
flocks of other geese, particularly European Whitefronts.

Pink-footed Goose

This species winters in the eastern half of Scotland from the Moray
Firth to the Border, in the Solway Firth, Lancashire and Humber-
side, and around the Wash. Large flocks, often of several thousands,
may be found in these areas from late September through to April,
with smaller numbers remaining into May or even June. Summering
by pricked birds is quite common. The preferred feeding habitat is
farmland, concentrating on stubble and harvested potato fields in
autumn and moving on to grass and sometimes growing cereal crops
later in the winter. Feeding on saltmarshes occurs in a few localities.
The birds roost at night on undisturbed inland waters such as lakes
and reservoirs, or on tidal mudflats.

Away from the main wintering areas, the Pinkfoot may turn up
almost anywhere, either singly or in small groups, alone or in a
flock of another species. It formerly wintered in some numbers in
Gloucestershire and Ireland, where it is now only a straggler.

White-fronted Goose

The European Whitefront winters in the southern half of England
and Wales, with regular haunts in Norfolk, Kent, Hampshire, Corn-
wall, Gloucestershire and Dyfed and around the Shropshire/Powys
border. The smallest regular flock is of a little over 100 birds, the
largest of 6,000-7,000. This race is not uncommonly seen on migra­
tion to or from these haunts, and small flocks turn up with some
regularity in Suffolk, Essex, East and West Sussex, Oxfordshire,
Somerset, Avon and Gwent. Whitefronts feed almost exclusively on
wet grassland, including saltmarshes, and roost mainly in sheltered
estuaries. Floods are sometimes used for roosting, however, and in
one area a small lake. This race is infrequently reported away from
its traditional localities and then usually in ones or twos, or at most
a family party, and with other geese. Stragglers reach Scotland and
Ireland. The birds arrive from the end of September in small num­
bers, building up to a January peak, before departing in mid-March.

The Greenland Whitefront is virtually confined as a regular
winterer to western Scotland and Ireland, with outliers on Anglesey
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(Gwynedd) and in the Dovey estuary (Dyfed). The Scottish haunts are on the Outer and Inner Hebrides (particularly Islay), on the Mull of Kintyre (Strathclyde) and in Galloway. It is widely spread in Ireland but, apart from the 5,000-6,000 on the Wexford Slobs, occurs in small flocks rarely totalling more than a few hundreds. Indeed, even within a district where quite large numbers are present, the birds are in small flocks, or even pairs or family parties, scattered over a wide area. Although the geese have adapted in recent years to arable and improved grassland on the Wexford Slobs, the traditional habitat of wet grassland, often with extensive patches of rushes growing in it, and peat bogs, is still used elsewhere. Outside its normal range the Greenland Whitefront occurs as a straggler with flocks of other species, not unnaturally more frequently in the north and west than in other regions. The birds do not arrive in numbers until mid-October and they stay until the middle of April.

Lesser White-fronted Goose

This species occurs almost annually in Britain, usually from one to three individuals being seen. There is only one Irish record. It has hardly ever been identified on its own, but consorts mainly with flocks of European Whitefronts, sometimes with Bean Geese and once with Greenland Whitefronts. It is not very common in captivity and virtually all the occurrences are of undoubtedly wild birds.

Greylag Goose

The Western race of the Greylag is resident in the Outer Hebrides (some hundreds of birds) and, more thinly, in north and west Highland from Caithness to Wester Ross, though this small mainland population is now mingled with reintroduced birds. As a result of introductions, there is a rather larger resident population in southwest Scotland, with certainly over 1,000 in Galloway. Further introductions have been made more recently in the Lake District, Kent and elsewhere, and small feral flocks of full-winged Greylags are now likely to be met with in many areas. These are not necessarily approachable, and there may be no way of distinguishing them from wild birds in the field. Consequently, unless the presence of such feral stock in the district is already known, it is now almost impossible to decide whether a small flock away from the main ranges of the wild residents and winter visitors (see below) is composed of genuinely wild birds or not.

Wintering Greylags from Icelandic breeding grounds are now confined to Scotland (particularly the eastern half but also reaching the Firth of Clyde and Galloway), and to a handful of places in Ireland and the extreme north of England (only a few hundred birds in either country). The habitat is very similar to that of the
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Pinkfoot, though rather more preference is shown for flooded grassland which may be used for roosting, along with lakes and estuaries. The geese arrive in late October and depart mostly in late April, though some stay into May. A few pricked birds probably summer.

The Eastern Greylag is, unaccountably, not included in the current British and Irish list, though individuals undoubtedly referable to it have been seen in Britain, particularly in southern England, on a number of occasions. Some may have been escapes from captivity, where it is not, however, very common, but it seems virtually certain that genuinely wild birds have occurred.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea of difficulty in distinguishing between a Greylag and a Pinkfoot has probably never occurred to most birdwatchers living in eastern Scotland. But elsewhere this is a real problem, while nearly everyone would admit to the possibility of being puzzled by an out-of-context Bean Goose or Whitefront.

At all times it is important to concentrate on shape and silhouette. Indeed, these are often all that can be seen of a distant bird in indifferent light. The upperwing pattern (or lack of it) should always be looked for, but some of the more subtle features described above are usable only when both the view and the light are good.

To those whose lot it is to be baffled by stray grey geese far from their normal haunts, we would strongly urge that they go to some of the regular wintering localities of the different species and familiarise themselves with the birds’ appearance and calls, both in flight and on the ground. And after all, as well as improving one’s knowledge, what more rewarding experience is there than to be surrounded by the sight and sound of thousands of wild geese?

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