

On Identifying Cackling and Canada Geese

In 2004, the AOU announced that Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) is now split into two goose species: Canada Goose (*B. canadensis*) and Cackling Goose (*B. hutchinsii*). Observers participating in the Christmas Bird Counts will need to distinguish these two species when they are counting *Branta* geese. A good website to consult on this matter is http://www.sibleyguides.com/canada_cackling.htm.

Here in Colorado, we routinely observe three forms of Canada Goose and one form of Cackling Goose. The form of the Cackling Goose in Colorado is the RICHARDSON'S Goose (*B. hutchinsii hutchinsii*). It is almost identical to the Canada Goose forms in Colorado except that it is much smaller, measuring about 27" from beak to tail, or about 20% longer than a Mallard (23"). However, it appears significantly larger than Mallard due to its mass and wingspan. Sibley describes its average mass as 2300 g, with a wingspan of 47". Compare these to 1100 g and 35" for Mallard. The measurements of Richardson's Goose are slightly smaller than Lesser Snow Goose (the form found in Colorado), but the bill is almost as small as that of Ross's Goose.

The forms of Canada Goose are (in order of winter abundance) INTERIOR, GIANT/MOFFIT'S, and LESSER. Most of the migratory, large Canada Geese that flock to Colorado in winter are the INTERIOR form (*B. c. interior*). Their bills are almost as large as GIANT/MOFFIT'S. Their mass is 4200 g, so they are almost as large as GIANT/MOFFIT'S, which is the resident goose in Colorado, and also the largest. This population has its origins in MOFFIT'S Canada Goose (*B. c. moffitti*) and the introduced GIANT Canada Goose (*B. c. maxima*). Approximate measurements are 45" length, 60" wingspan, 4500 g mass. The bills of these birds are the largest. LESSER Canada Goose (*B.c. parvipes*) is intermediate in size between INTERIOR and RICHARDSON'S Cackling Goose, measurements averaging 36" length, 53" wingspan, and 2750 g mass. These are easily mistaken for Cackling Geese but their head and bill shapes are more like those of the larger forms of Canada Goose.

Other forms to be aware of in case they turn up in Colorado would be *B. h. minima*, the smallest of the Cackling Goose forms which winters mainly in western Oregon. This bird is slightly larger than Mallard, short necked, small headed (very round head) and tiny-billed. Its underparts (particularly the chest) are much darker than all the forms that occur regularly in Colorado. A similar but slightly larger form of Cackling Goose, *B. h. leucopareia* (ALEUTIAN) is the same size as RICHARDSON'S. This form is endangered and winters in northern California. It usually has a thick white ring at the base of the neck, and a dark chest. Finally, another form slightly larger is *B. h. taverneri* (TAVERNER'S) and also winters on the pacific coast. This form is slightly darker-chested than RICHARDSON'S, tends to have less white on the head, and is slightly smaller-billed. Note that all forms are subject to plumage and size variations. White neck rings and black chin straps (under the bill) can occur in all forms. Any of the above forms of Cackling Goose will require documentation (preferably photographs).

When in doubt, avoid misidentification. Instead, count unidentified geese as *Branta* spp. or "white-cheeked geese."