

Finding Cackling and Canada Geese in the Central Valley

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By now we've all had a winter to sort out what the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Committee on Classification and Nomenclature has done to the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), but I suspect there are still many birders who would like some clarification. Genetic studies have shown that the Canada Goose complex splits rather neatly into a group of seven large-bodied, more southerly nesting forms still known as Canada Geese, and a group of five (one extinct) small-bodied, more northerly nesting forms now known as Cackling Geese (*Branta hutchinsii*).

In most of California, and especially in the Central Valley, one would be hard put to find more than two of the Canada Goose forms. The Great Basin Canada Goose (*B. c. moffitti*, a.k.a. Western Canada Goose, a.k.a. Common Canada Goose, a.k.a. "honker") is the ubiquitous large, pale-breasted bird which formerly nested in northeastern California but now — thanks to a combination of deliberate introductions, escapes from captive waterfowl breeders, and some natural range expansion — is a common sight all year long throughout the Central Valley. The other form of Canada Goose we have is usually known as the Lesser (*B. c. parvipes*). Formerly a common member of the wintering goose flocks in the Central Valley, all but a few hundred of these birds now winter in Oregon and Washington. The Lesser Canada Goose is only about half the size of *moffitti*, but very similar in appearance.

A small population of Dusky Canada Goose (*B. c. occidentalis*), a very dark, but still large form, winters in extreme northwestern California, and I have seen pictures of a couple of birds shot near Chico, Butte County, that may have been this subspecies. *B. c. maxima*, the Giant Canada Goose, has occasionally been released in the Central Valley by game bird fanciers or sportsmen's groups (never with official sanction, however).

In the Central Valley, Cackling Geese, as now constituted, consist of tens of thousands of Aleutian Cackling Geese (*B. h. leucopareia*), a few thousand of what used to have exclusive use of the Cackling Goose name (*B. h. minima*), and a few hundred of Taverner's Cackling Goose (*B. h. taverneri*). All are small bodied and more or less darker in color than our Canada Geese.

This is not an identification paper, but if birders are going to go looking for the two species, they certainly want some idea of what they're looking for. In most cases, identification to species will be straightforward. The Cackling Geese are small, with small bills, steep foreheads, and short necks. The Canada Geese are large, with large bills, sloping foreheads, and longer necks. The problem is that *parvipes* Canadas overlap in size to some degree with both *taverneri* and *leucopareia* Cacklers, and while the former are

generally light breasted, like *moffitti*, some can be as dark as *taverneri*, and vice versa. Head shape and bill size are the best characters to use for separating the mid-sized white-cheeked geese to species (see Deuel, Western Birds 35:181-183, 2004, for additional details).

If a birder wants to see a Cackling Goose of any type in the Central Valley, this is easily accomplished. Thousands of Aleutian Cackling Geese can be found every winter on Woodbridge Road and Staten Island in San Joaquin County. They also occur in large numbers in the grassland areas around the refuges in Merced County. Early in the fall they can be found around the Butte Sink in Colusa and Sutter counties, but they often frequent areas not very accessible to the public at that time.

Mixed in with the large Aleutian flocks, or sometimes in pure flocks, in these same areas will be significant number of *minima* Cackling Geese. Formerly abundant in the Sacramento Valley, very few winter there now, as all the small geese except Aleutians now prefer to winter in Oregon. But if one wants the challenge of identifying either *taverneri* Cacklers or *parvipes* Canadas, or trying to separate the two, the best areas to look are around the edges of the Valley. I have seen “lessers,” as I will refer to them collectively, in the grasslands of Tehama County, between Red Bluff and Black Butte Reservoir; on the Vina Plains in Butte and Tehama counties; at Stony Gorge Reservoir in Glenn County; in the grassy fields on the southwest side of Folsom Lake, and at Pardee Reservoir on the Amador/Calaveras line. I would expect to find them around, and indeed have seen them reported recently from, other reservoirs in the grassy foothills, such as Camanche and Salt Springs Valley.

I encourage observers to get as much experience as they can with the common *moffitti* Canada Geese and the *leucoparidea* and *minima* Cackling Geese. Then take some exploratory trips into the foothill grasslands in search of the challenging “lessers,” and be sure to report your findings. We’re still working out the details on range and identification of these forms, giving all birders the chance to contribute significant to our knowledge base.



Figure 1. A Canada Goose (*B. c. parvipes*), at left, a Cackling Goose (*B. h. taverneri*), center, and a Canada Goose (*B. c. moffitti*), at right; at Virginia Lake Park, Reno, Nevada, on 4 December 2004. photo © Martin Meyers