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Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*: First Australian Mainland Occurrence

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Summary

A record of a Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* present at Shoalhaven Heads on the New South Wales coast in 2002 has been accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee. This constitutes the first mainland occurrence of the species as a wild vagrant. It is considered most likely to have been derived from the introduced population of New Zealand.

Introduction

A Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* was present at the mouth of the Shoalhaven River or at nearby Comorong Island at Shoalhaven Heads, New South Wales, from 18 October to at least 21 November 2002. Noel Linehan and Lindsay Smith found the bird and immediately alerted other observers. It was seen by many observers, and the general consensus was that it was a wild vagrant and not an escapee from a wildfowl collection, that it had originated from the feral population in New Zealand, and therefore the species should be added to the list of those having occurred on the Australian mainland. This premise was tested by a submission to the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC). The 'committee voted unanimously in favour of acceptance and commented that the bird was "most likely" of wild origin from the New Zealand population' (Case No. 401, Tony Palliser, Chairman, BARC, *in litt.* 3 May 2004). This is the first report of a Canada Goose to be put before BARC or its predecessor, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Records Appraisal Committee, but the species is already on the Australian list because of two previous occurrences on Lord Howe Island (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Christidis & Boles 1994; McAllan *et al.* 2004).

Habitat

The bird frequented the wide expanse of the estuary of the Shoalhaven River, in particular the area adjacent to the township of Shoalhaven Heads near the original mouth of the river. A sandbar has formed at this point, as the river now flows to the sea via a canal connecting the Shoalhaven to the Crookhaven River farther south (Chafer 1998). The area is saline, tidal and rather shallow (sandbanks emerge at low tide), with areas of weed and seagrass. Such estuarine habitat is utilised by the species in New Zealand, where the birds graze on aquatic plants (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Heather *et al.* 1997). Like the Black Swans *Cygnus atratus* at the Shoalhaven location, it was observed feeding on the macro-algae *Lamprothamnium* sp. and possibly seagrass *Ruppia* (Chris Chafer *in litt.* 10 June 2004).

Behaviour

The observations of nearly 50 contributors to the Internet chat group

Canada Goose with Black Swans at Shoalhaven Heads, NSW, 29 October 2002
Plate 3 Photo: Mike Carter

BIRDING-AUS (in December 2005, the group archives were still available at www.birding-aus.org), particularly communications from Tony Palliser, Phil Hansbro and Dion Hobcroft, suggested that the bird was probably a truly wild vagrant, and my experience was typical of that reported by them and others. I searched for the bird on 29 October 2002, and found it associating with a flock of 15 Black Swans, rather fewer than others had reported, along the seaward shore of the estuary. The weather was fine, sunny and mild with a slight breeze. Both species were bottom feeding by immersing their heads and necks, upending at times. As I was eager to photograph the bird, I pursued it but found it and the Swans difficult to approach. On one occasion, I crept to within 50 m of the bird. The Swans were less tolerant and swam off first, leaving the Goose some 10 m closer. Before I could obtain any photographs, the flock flushed. The Swans flew about 1 km down the estuary and then turned back, landing on the water 200–300 m offshore. The Goose did not stay with the Swans, flying much further, but returned within a few minutes. It alighted some 50 m beyond the Swans, then slowly swam in to join them. I waited for the flock to settle down and approach the shore, which took almost half an hour. Eventually I obtained some adequate but rather poor, distant photographs.

Description

Since the bird was obviously a large goose, easily identifiable and with no confusable species at least in our region, only a brief description is provided. The photograph, Plate 3, shows the diagnostic features of the bird.

The body length was about two-thirds that of the accompanying Black Swans but the relatively shorter neck was held less erect. The head and the whole of the neck were black with a very

obvious broad white slash on the side of the head extending from the chin and throat across the cheek to the ear-coverts. This was the most distinctive feature. When the bird was swimming, the dorsal surface appeared mid-brown narrowly barred with white on the back. The breast, vent and undertail-coverts were white, creating white patches of equal size fore and aft. These patches contrasted sharply with the black neck and brown-and-white barred sides and flanks. On the sides, the white barring dominated anteriorly and the brown posteriorly. The tail was black. The irides, bill and legs were dark, possibly black. In flight, the remiges appeared darker than the wing-coverts (more contrasting than shown in the flight illustration in Marchant & Higgins 1990), and the uppertail-coverts were white, forming a 'U'-shaped patch between the black rump and tail.

Identification

Identification to species is simple and needs no discussion. The clarity of the white facial mark (i.e. the absence of a brown wash) suggests that this was not a juvenile and was in adult plumage. The very pale breast and, to a lesser extent, the stocky build and large size indicate that the bird was of the subspecies *maxima*, the taxon established in New Zealand (Marchant & Higgins 1990).

Provenance of the bird

The reasons put before BARC on why this individual should be regarded as a wild bird originating from the abundant introduced population in New Zealand, rather than an escapee from a wildfowl collection, are given below. These are ranked in a putative order of significance.

1. The bird was not tame and behaved as a wild bird.

2. It was free flying, indeed a very strong flier, and there was no sign that it had ever been pinioned. Moreover it was not banded, but this may have little significance as not all captive birds are banded.

3. None was known to be missing from waterfowl collections in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory or other sources, although less is known about more remote collections.

4. Vagrants have previously occurred on Lord Howe Island off Australia (Marchant & Higgins 1990; Christidis & Boles 1994; McAllan *et al*. 2004), as well as the Kermadec, Chatham and Auckland Islands off New Zealand (Heather *et al*. 1997) and in New Caledonia (McAllan *et al.* 2004). The New Zealand population, the vast majority of which is on the South Island, is partially migratory and has increased recently (Heather *et al.* 1997).

5. The bird utilised estuarine habitat, as do some Canada Geese in New Zealand. It is probably less likely that a captive bird, familiar only with fresh water and grazing on land, would make such a choice.

6. The location, being on the far eastern coast of Australia, adds to the likelihood that the bird was a trans-Tasman migrant. The Double-banded Plover *Charadrius bicinctus* and White-fronted Tern *Sterna striata* are regular New Zealand migrants to this area, and the South Island Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus finschi* has appeared elsewhere along this coast.

7. There is no evidence of previous reports of Canada Geese that were obviously, or believed to be, escapees in Australia. If there were any, one might expect them to associate with feral and other waterfowl on lakes in e.g. public parks, where they would easily be detected.

Several experts on waterfowl collections were consulted. David Rushton of Canberra noted that Canada Geese are quite widely kept in collections in Australia but, since they are worth $2,000 a pair, someone would have to be careless to let one go. Like this bird, and the feral population in New Zealand, most, but not all, are of the 'giant' subspecies *maxima*. The absence of bands is no indication that the bird was not an escapee, as not all captive birds are banded. Rushton thought also that the bird's behaviour should give a clue to its origin. After some research, he concluded that it was more likely to have originated in New Zealand than in Australia. Nick Walton, Assistant Director, Wildlife Permits & Enforcement, Wildlife Australia, Environment Australia, advised that when the Federal National Register of Exotic Species in Captivity closed in January 2002, throughout Australia 62 Canada Geese were registered as captive. None was reported as missing, but since then the register has become a State responsibility, so this may not be conclusive.

There are no previous mainland reports of the Canada Goose in the Unusual or Interesting Sightings Reports published in *The Bird Observer* (Bill Ramsay, BOCA Unusual Sightings Co-ordinator, pers. comm.). These usually include reports of birds considered to be escapees. Similarly, Alan Morris, recorder for New South Wales, presented no evidence of previous occurrences, and the species was 'unrecorded' in *The New Atlas of Australian Birds* (Barrett *et al.* 2003), for which the recording of exotic species was encouraged.

It has been suggested that this bird may have arrived from New Zealand with Black Swans. Swans are regularly sighted well out to sea on pelagic excursions from the New South Wales coast, suggesting a trans-Tasman movement (Tony Palliser *in litt.* 2 June 2004).

Disappearance of the bird

The last reported sighting of the bird was on 21 November 2002. It may have just moved elsewhere because, later in its stay, it wandered more widely and became difficult to locate. Some observers connected the bird's disappearance with bush fires in the surrounding area when, coincidentally, the number of Black Swans decreased.

Environment Australia, in conjunction with authorities in New South Wales and some members of the birding community, were eager that the bird be destroyed in case a feral population became established here. There was also concern that it might have carried an exotic disease from New Zealand. I received several calls asking for precise details of the bird's location from bodies such as the National Parks & Wildlife Service, and the bird may have been shot or otherwise destroyed.

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Chris Chafer, Tony Palliser and Bill Ramsay read and commented on this paper and provided useful additional information. Nick Walton provided data from the Exotic Species Register, and David Rushton communicated general information on Canada Geese in waterfowl collections in Australia. Ian McAllan and Ian Hutton provided the relevant text of their paper on Lord Howe Island before publication. In particular, I thank Lindsay Smith and Noel Linehan for their discovery and prompt advice, and all who contributed to the discussion on BIRDING-AUS.

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