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An Evaluation of the late "White Goose" Season and the Goose Management Zone in Alberta - 1963

W. Wishart
Alberta Wildlife DivisionL. Sugden
Canadian Wildlife ServiceIntroduction

For many years, the inadvertent but illegal shooting of Ross' geese during the regular open season on Lesser Snow geese has created a perplexing problem. With increasing numbers of Ross' in recent years, the problem has become more serious for enforcement officers. In the mid-fifties, various persons suggested that a later opening on Snow geese would eliminate much of the Ross' kill since the latter species ^{has} an earlier migration and the bulk of the population would have travelled south before the season opened on the snows.

Finally, in 1963, a special zone - The Goose Management Zone - was delineated to encompass the main staging areas for Ross' geese in southern Alberta. It includes such lakes as Cough, Farrell, Dowling, Sullivan, Kirkpatrick and Fitzgerald. The zone is bounded by Highway 12 on the north, 56 on the west, 9 on the south and the Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary on the east. An adjacent area in Saskatchewan was described for the same purpose.

Within the Goose Management Zone, white geese, including Snows and Ross' did not become legal until October 7th, whereas Canadas and Whitefronts were legal on September 16th. All geese were legal game on September 16th on adjacent areas in Alberta. It was felt that, by October 7th, most of the Ross' would be gone whereas the Snow goose population would be building up. Thus a small harvest of Ross' was anticipated.

The purpose of this report is to present our observations on the

goose harvest within the zone in an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the new regulations. Included in the report are statistics collected in the field by Fish and Wildlife Officer, Al Boggs and Vic Sigurdson, and by professional goose pluckers at Hanna, Coronation and Cereal. We wish also to acknowledge check station assistance from J. McGillis and R.H. Mackay, Canadian Wildlife Service; J. McGrath, A. Kirkwood and G.J. Mitchell, Alberta Wildlife Division; G. Adams, R.C.M.P.; and W. Rutherford and R. Hopper, Colorado Fish and Game Department.

Migration of Ross' Geese

Ross' geese first appeared in the Castor-Coronation area on September 6th when a flock of about 12 was seen on the northeast arm of Lake Sullivan. Thereafter, the population slowly increased to reach a peak about September 25th or slightly earlier. Movement of Snow geese into the area made census difficult. No large concentrations of Ross' were observed. The largest flock encountered was one of about 800 Ross' on Fitzgerald Lake on September 17th. By September 20th, most of those had left. There definitely were not the numbers of Ross' on the lakes, particularly Sullivan, that have been reported in earlier autumns. Evidently drought conditions in Alberta in 1960 and 1961 caused a population shift to the Kindersley, Sask. area and a similar distribution prevailed in 1963 in spite of improved water conditions in Alberta. What Ross' there were in Alberta appeared to be distributed in small flocks on many water bodies.

A few Ross' (about 1%) were observed on Gough Lake in a flock of Snows (5000 +) on October 6th. On October 10th George Mitchell saw a flock of 14 near Fitzgerald Lake. That a few stayed later is indicated by bag check records wherein one was shot near Coronation on

October 24th and 3 were handled by the Hanna plucker on October 21st. One Ross' shot in Saskatchewan was checked by Wishart on October 25th.

The Goose Kill

Bag checking was undertaken at various points within or bordering the Goose Management Zone. Some checking was done prior to the white goose season; however, no white geese were checked. The Hanna plucker handled 16 Snow geese prior to October 7th but no Ross'. Although bag check data for areas outside the Goose Management Zone are limited, we know of only one Ross' taken outside the zone. That goose was probably killed near Beaverhill Lake. Table 1 gives the species composition of geese checked — principally from October 7th to 14th.

Table 1. Geese shot in and near the Goose Management Zone

Source	Canada	Whitefront	Snow	Ross'
Wishart (Check Stn.)	122	16	130	3
Sugden (Check Stn.)	76	24	133	3
Boggs (field)*	56	20	34	0
Murphy (field)	25	7	21	0
Pluckers	676	98	129	3
Totals (1576)	955	165	447	9
Percentage	60.6	10.5	28.3	0.6 *

* includes records kept at Sullivan Lake Lodge

Of a total of 456 white geese checked, 9 or 2.0 per cent were Ross'.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of sex and age of geese for which those data are available.

Table 2. Sex and age of geese

Species	Adult		Juvenile		Totals
	M	F	M	F	
Small Canada	23	20	29	31	103
Large Canada	9	14	0	0	23
Whitefront	10	3	13	11	37
Snow	48	45	68	63	224
Ross'	3	1	0	2	6

It is obvious that few Ross' geese were taken in Southern Alberta in 1963. The frequency of Ross' in hunters' bags no doubt diminished after our checks. After the first week in October the Snow goose population increased rapidly and that species would absorb the bulk of the white goose kill. Such a low Ross' kill is in contrast to the illegal kill reported in earlier years. Information from various correspondence and reports indicate the magnitude of earlier kills; Wm. Rowan (in litt.) examined most of 17 geese killed by a party of hunters near Hanna on September 16, 1956 and found all were Ross'. The previous year he was told of 25 Ross' being taken on a single shoot by one party. Reporting on investigations by himself and R. Webb in 1957 R.D. Harris estimated the number of Ross' taken in the Sullivan Lake area could approach 3-400 annually at that time. That year they checked 51 white geese of which 12 or 23 per cent were Ross'. R. Webb reported his bagcheck results in the Castor-Hanna area for 1962 in the 1962 Annual Report of the Alberta Department of Lands and Forests. That year Ross' geese made up 6.3 per cent of the total goose kill and 15 per cent of the white goose harvest.

It could be pointed out that the comparatively low Ross' goose kill

in 1963 cannot be entirely credited to the new regulations. As mentioned elsewhere, the population of Ross' staying in southern Alberta was lower and that, no doubt, has helped to reduce the kill. Nevertheless we believe the later opening on white geese in the Goose Management Zone achieved its objectives - i.e. reduction of the Ross' harvest and elimination of the enforcement problem.

Hunter Reaction

By and large, hunters were understanding and accepted the later opening on white geese without criticism. A few complained good-naturedly that they could have taken limits of white geese which came into their decoys. On the other hand, some hunters prefer to hunt Whitefronts and Canadae anyway. The later opening for white geese coincided nicely with the major movement of Snow geese into the Goose Management Zone.

Summary and Conclusions

- (1) Bag checking in and near the Goose Management Zone was undertaken in 1963 in order to evaluate new regulations affecting Snow and Ross' goose harvests.
- (2) Composition of the harvest was: Canadae - 60.6%, Whitefront - 10.5%, Snow - 28.3%, and Ross' - 0.6%.
- * (3) Ross' geese made up but 2% of the white goose kill in contrast to 15% in 1962 and 23% in 1957.
- (4) Hunter reaction to the new regulation was favourable.
- (5) ^{In 1963.} the later opening on white geese in the Goose Management Zone achieved its objective, i.e.: (a) reduction of the Ross' goose harvest and (b) elimination of the enforcement problem.

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