

'Tundra' Bean Goose *Anser fabalis rossicus/serrirostris* at Tahla Lake, Alwar district, Rajasthan

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Photo: Sunil Singhal



The Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* breeds from northern Scandinavia eastwards across northern Asia. Five forms are generally recognised, three of which breed in the Taiga biome, and two in the Tundra. These two groups are treated as representing separate species by several authors, e.g., Brown (2010). However, the Bean Goose complex has enjoyed a complicated taxonomic history. Cramp & Simmons (1977), and del Hoyo *et al.* (1992) consider the Bean Goose to be a single polytypic species. But some recent works like Sangster & Oreel (1996), present strong cases to treat it as three monotypic species: Pink-footed Goose *A. brachyrhynchus*, Taiga Bean Goose *A. fabalis*, and Tundra Bean Goose *A. serrirostris*. However, Ruokonen *et al.* (2008) considered *A. middendorffii* a monotypic species, with the other four being races of a single species. In view of this uncertainty in taxonomy, Dickinson & Remsen (2013) treat it as a single species, with five races, which is also the case in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), and del Hoyo *et al.* (1992).

The Bean Goose is an extreme rarity in the Indian Subcontinent, and is included in the 'Indian Checklist' based on three recent photographic records, and an old specimen (Praveen *et al.* 2014). Ali & Ripley (2001) included it in the *Handbook* on the basis of historical records, a majority of which remain unverified, and probably refer to other *Anser* species as well (Praveen *et al.* 2014). Rasmussen & Anderton (2005, 2012) included it in their work, based on recent sightings. Two recent Nepal records are from Chitwan National Park (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991; Robson 2004).

The serendipitous sighting at Tahla Lake (27.23°N, 76.42°E), also called Mara Sarovar, Alwar district, Rajasthan of Bean Goose was noted in the images posted on Delhi Birds by Sunil Singhal on 01 February 2015. The goose was picked out from amongst the gaggle of Greylag Geese *A. anser*, by Adesh Shivkar. Prompted

by the exciting discovery, Sunil Singhal again visited the lake on 11 February, 2015. He was lucky to find the bird again, as finding a single individual on a big lake was not easy, as c. 1500 geese (c. 300 Greylag, and c. 1200 Bar-headed Geese *A. indicus*) were present there till mid-February.

Sudhir Garg and I visited the lake on 14 February 2015. In very windy, and dusty, conditions it seemed like a gargantuan task to pick a Bean Goose from amongst c. 1500 geese. Aided by a 20x70 telescope, the bird was found after searching for some time. It gave good views for about a minute before getting lost in the mixed gaggle. By this time the angle of light had also become unfavourable to properly see the diagnostic features from the embankment. Therefore, we decided to change our location and soon found it in the company of a small flock of Greylag upending in the water. Disturbed by a fishing boat the geese took off after ten minutes but provided an opportunity to compare them in flight. Later it was found again in the company of a mixed gaggle of Greylag-, and Bar-headed Geese.

brown; the prominent white line at the upper border of flank was conspicuous. Undertail coverts and tail margin white.

The goose was seen five–six times in flight and showed dark wings, both above and below, and orangish-yellow legs. It was distinguishable from Greylag by the lack of pale forewing. Moreover, in flight, it appeared about ten per cent smaller than a Greylag Goose [73].

From a distance its bill appeared entirely dark. Only from close quarters, or when scoped, was the neat sub-terminal band of orange-yellow visible, on an otherwise black bill. Its legs and feet were a deep orange-yellow, and resembled the colours of the corresponding parts on a Bar-headed Goose.

Behaviour: It mixed freely with its congeners on the lake, while foraging, and roosting but would mostly 'stick' to a small sub-group of Greylag Geese, assumed to be the carrier species. Occasionally, it was seen alone, for short periods. It was generally more shy and wary, like the Greylag Geese, when compared with Bar-headed Geese, which were more approachable on the lake. Although the goose was observed five–six times in flight with the sub-group of Greylag Geese it was never heard calling.



73. Bar-headed-, Bean-, and Greylag- Geese in flight.

During a second visit to the lake on 22 February 2015 the number of Greylag- and Bar-headed Geese were less, but the sub-group of five–six Greylag Geese, with which Bean Goose was seen associating, was still there.

Field notes

Description: The Tahla bird was a stubby 'grey goose'; it generally differed in size and structure from a Greylag Goose, and gave an overall browner impression. Being a 'Tundra' type it was noticeably smaller than Greylag Goose with head rounded and bill short and relatively deep based.

The head and neck were brown, darkest on head. Upper breast brown. Mantle, scapulars and tertials were medium

Discussion

Although four records of the Bean Goose have been accepted for India, based on three recent photographic records, and an old specimen, it was not possible to comment on the races of these records given the poor diagnosability of all the evidences (Praveen *et al.* 2014).

Geographical variation in the Bean Goose is rather marked, but complex, owing to intergradations and individual variation in both, size, and bill pattern; it can be impossible to assign some birds to a particular subspecies in the field (Beaman & Madge 1998). However, the subspecies *fabalis* is about as large as a Greylag Goose, but has a narrower neck, smaller head, and slimmer bill and body; bill is usually long, and the amount of orange on it is variable. On the other hand, *rossicus* is slightly

smaller, has a shorter neck, and a darker head and neck, which contrast more markedly with its paler body, than in *fabalis* (Madge & Burn 1988; Kear 2005; Beaman & Madge 1998). Images [74-78] clearly show that this particular bird is much smaller than Greylags and has a shorter neck, and a darker head with very little orange on its short bill. This combination of features eliminates all three 'Taiga' forms of Bean Geese, and leaves only the two 'Tundra' races: the western *rossicus*, and the eastern *serrirostris*. The eastern *serrirostris* is apparently the larger of the two (wing of male 440–524 mm vs 430–478 mm) but field separation may not be possible on current knowledge (Carboneras *et al.* 2014).

In reality it is not possible to identify every individual Bean Goose with a complete certainty (Brown 2010). Fortunately, it was possible to assign the Tahla bird to the 'Tundra' group based on extended observations in good light conditions, and the availability of several good quality photographs.

The Bean Goose was discovered at Tahla on 01 February 2015, and was last seen there on 03 March 2015, with sub-groups Greylags.

The rarity of the Bean Goose in our part of the world is explained by the fact that it is less likely, than other species, to move southwards at the onset of hard weather, as it is able to use

its bill to probe in the snow, and also changes its food to taller crops (Philippona 1966).

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74. Bean Goose





76. The Bean Goose is much smaller than the other two geese.



77. Bean Goose with characteristic black beak.

Photos: Sudhir Garg

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78. Bean goose with Gray lag.

Photo: Sandeep Singh