

The Journal of Caribbean Ornithology

RESEARCH NOTE

Vol. 32:53–56. 2019

Historical status of geese in Jamaica and an early record of a Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*)

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Illustration courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica

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Abstract There are no species of geese native to Jamaica. Here I discuss a patchy history of records of three vagrant species of geese that have been recorded on the island, including the Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*), Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), and Orinoco Goose (*Neochen jubata*). Furthermore, an illustration and description from 1758 of a Snow Goose in Jamaica has been discovered, becoming the second confirmed record for this species in Jamaica.

Keywords *Anser caerulescens*, *Branta canadensis*, Canada Goose, Jamaica, migrant species, *Neochen jubata*, Orinoco Goose, Snow Goose

Resumen Estatus histórico de los gansos en Jamaica y uno de los primeros registros de *Anser caerulescens*—En Jamaica no existen especies de gansos nativos. Aquí discuto una historia irregular sobre los registros de tres especies vagrantes de gansos que se han registrado en la isla, que incluyen *Anser caerulescens*, *Branta canadensis* y *Neochen jubata*. Además, se descubrió una ilustración y descripción de 1758 de un individuo de *Anser caerulescens* en Jamaica. Esto se convirtió en el segundo registro confirmado para la especie en el país.

Palabras clave *Anser caerulescens*, *Branta canadensis*, especies migratorias, Jamaica, *Neochen jubata*

Résumé Statut historique des oies en Jamaïque et mention ancienne d'Oie des neiges (*Anser caerulescens*)—Aucune espèce d'oie n'est originaire de la Jamaïque. Le présent article présente l'histoire fragmentaire des mentions de trois espèces d'oies erratiques sur l'île : l'Oie des neiges (*Anser caerulescens*), la Bernache du Canada (*Branta canadensis*) et l'Ouette de l'Orénoque (*Neochen jubata*). En outre, une illustration et une description d'Oie des neiges datant de 1758 ont été découvertes en Jamaïque, devenant ainsi la deuxième mention confirmée pour cette espèce sur l'île.

Mots clés *Anser caerulescens*, Bernache du Canada, *Branta canadensis*, espèces migratrices, Jamaïque, *Neochen jubata*, Oie des neiges, Ouette de l'Orénoque

No species of goose is native to Jamaica; geese have been recorded on the island only as occasional vagrants or introduced species. An early reference by Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés (1851) to the hunting of “ansares” does not permit positive identification of the species to which he refers.

Fowl of all types have long been kept for domestic use in Jamaica. Sloane (1725:323) noted “geese do not prosper, for their want of water.” Browne (1756:480) listed geese, duck, and all manner of “gallus,” noting that some are easily raised and “supply the greatest part of the tables of that island.” His reference to a goose is tantalizing but one cannot be sure of the species; translated, it reads, “Ash-colored whitish beneath, straight wide beak.” In the mid-19th century, Phillippo (1843:38) recorded the comparatively high value of geese and turkeys: “The price of a full-grown Turkey from 12s. [\$3 to \$4]; goose from 10s. to 12s.

[\$3 to \$4]; Muscovy duck, 5s. [\$1.25]; common fowl, 2s. 6d. [63 cents]; Guinea fowl, 4s. [\$1]; pigeons, 2s. [50 cents] per pair; eggs, 1s. 6d [31 cents] per dozen.”

Records of Geese in Jamaica

Various authors have recorded the Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*), Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), and Orinoco Goose (*Neochen jubata*), but what is the basis of these records?

The Orinoco Goose inhabits the eastern part of South America east of the Andes, from the Guianas down to northwestern Argentina, but on 1 October 1865 one was collected at the salt ponds near Spanish Town by W.T. March. The specimen was sent to the United States National Museum (now National Museum of Natural History [NMNH]) at the Smithsonian Institution. As Banks and Hole (1993:7) wrote, “It is doubtful, of course, that this bird represented a natural population of the species in Jamaica. It is highly likely that the bird was introduced by man and it may have been an escaped cage bird . . .” They continued, “Although new to the AOU Check-list area, the Orinoco Goose will

Table 1. Status of three species of geese in Jamaica. X = species not mentioned

	Pre-1847	1889	1920	1985	1998	2003	2009	2019
	Hill (from Gosse)	Cory	Bangs and Kennard	Bond	AOU	Raffaele <i>et al.</i>	Haynes-Sutton <i>et al.</i>	Lepage
Snow Goose	presumed Vagrant	Accidental	Accidental	X	Casual in the Greater Antilles	Bahamas, Cuba, Vagrant elsewhere	X	Accidental/Rare
Canada Goose	presumed Vagrant	recorded in Jamaica	Accidental	X	Questionable	Vagrant	Vagrant	Accidental/Rare
Orinoco Goose	X	X	X	X	specimen from 1865 in NMNH	Vagrant recorded in Jamaica	X	X

undoubtedly wind up in an appendix or hypothetical list.” This is reflected in the entry in the seventh edition of the *Check-list of North American Birds* prepared by the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU 1998).

In the mid-1800s, P.H. Gosse (1847:391) wrote of the American Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), “The congregated flocks of the neighboring islands disperse themselves; and stragglers appear upon the sand-bars at the mouths of our rivers, occasionally, in seasons remarkable for visits of the Hyperborean [i.e., Snow] and the Canada Goose.” Further, Gosse (1847:408) elaborated:

The remaining Anatidae which have been observed in Jamaica, I shall dismiss with a bare enumeration, furnished by my esteemed friend to whom this work is so deeply indebted [Richard Hill (1795–1872)]. Though some of them have fallen under my own notice, I have nothing to add to their known history. I treat them in this summary manner, the more willingly, because my friend is himself preparing for the press a treatise on the migratory birds of Jamaica, the fruit of many years’ close observation.

Included in his summary list were *Chen hyperboreus* (*Anser caerulescens*; Snow Goose) and *Anser canadensis* (*Branta canadensis*; Canada Goose).

Richard Hill was a prominent Jamaican who served as a member of the House of Assembly and as Secretary to the Stipendiary Magistrates to the Governor of Jamaica, and he traveled widely in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Hill collaborated with Gosse, supplying much of the information included in Gosse’s two publications, *Birds of Jamaica* and *A Naturalist’s Sojourn in Jamaica* (Cundall 1920).

March and Baird (1864:70) listed the Canada Goose, under the name *Bernicla canadensis*, as an “occasional visitor in connection with a severe winter on the continent.” Although Hill never published an authoritative list of migratory birds in Jamaica, he and March were well acquainted. From their descriptions of other extant Jamaican bird species, we know that both were fairly reliable observers, but without the benefit of modern-day illustrated bird books. In a letter dated 4 February 1869, March wrote to Spencer Baird of the Smithsonian Institution, “I managed to put up a small case of skins I had prepared for you—amongst them a Canadian Goose new to my list.” This was not a Canada Goose but rather a Snow Goose, entered in the Smithsonian’s register 4 May 1869.

Many subsequent authors continued to cite the presence of either one or both species of geese, mainly based on Gosse’s, and later, March’s accounts. These authors include Albrecht (1862), Newton and Newton (1881), Cory (1886, 1889), Scott (1891), Sclater (1910), Bangs and Kennard (1920), Bond (1936), and Raffaele *et al.* (2003), right up to the present day (Table 1). However, no unequivocal observation of either goose has actually been located since the time of Gosse and March.

Records of the Snow Goose

Apart from Gosse’s mention, we can be assured of the historical appearance of the Snow Goose in Jamaica on the basis of two records: (1) a specimen, no. 55102, of an immature individual taken by March (Fig. 1), who collected for Spencer Baird between 1861 and 1869; and (2) a newly discovered record from 1758.

The new record is an illustration and text by Dr. Anthony Robinson (Fig. 2). Robinson was born in England, probably about 1719, and lived in Jamaica from about 1748 until his death in 1768. While in Jamaica he collected information on plants and animals and illustrated many of them. Upon his death, Robinson left his natural history notes and illustrations to Robert Long (brother of Edward Long, who wrote *A History of Jamaica* in 1774). Long had them copied and put into volumes that were later donated to



Fig. 1. Photograph of an immature Snow Goose taken by W.T. March between 1861 and 1869; currently specimen no. 55102 at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Division of Birds. Photographs are courtesy of Brian K. Schmidt.



Fig. 2. A 1758 illustration with labels by Dr. Robinson of what appears to be the first record of the Snow Goose in Jamaica; courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.

the Jamaica Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture and other Arts and Sciences. Robinson's volumes finally ended up in the Institute of Jamaica, and today his notes and illustrations are archived at the National Library of Jamaica. With permission, I reproduce here his description of the wild goose (Robinson 1768):

A Description of a Wild-Goose shot at Bower's Pen in the year 1758:

From the tip of the Beak to the end of the middle toe two feet 6 inches. From the tip of one wing to the other tip better than four feet, her upper mandible was two inches and one eighth measuring from the Angles to the tip; both mandibles being black, two legs near three inches long [There appears to be a transcription error here as this leg length does not make any sense.] and covered with black scales, the feet were cover'd with brown scales. The toes were four in number and standing forward and covered by a membrane as in all this kind the middle toe was two inches and a half long including the claw, the case were horn color'd, the back toe was half an inch long with the claw.

The anterior part of the head was cover'd with russet feathers, the wings closed, better than fifteen inches long. The upper beak is longer than the lower. It has a lateral membrane on the inner side of the inner toes as most Geese have. This is nearly the same size with the blue-wing'd goose of Mr. Edwards see Fig. 152, part the third.

The labels under the illustration read (Fig. 2):

This is a good figure.

A Goose shot at Bower's River in Clarendon the size reduced from the original in proportion of [blank].

As this Bird was never seen before, it's probable it's a Bird of Passage. It may perchance be the same as the Summer Goose taken notice of by Mr. Edwards, part 3. Pag. 152.

It seems that the lowest label is in the handwriting of Robinson himself, while the first two labels are in the hand of Robert Long or one of the copyists he employed. Bower's River is in lower Clarendon Parish near present day Longville Park; Longville being the name of the property owned by the Long family. Chronologically, Dr. Robinson's account and illustration would appear to be the first record of the Snow Goose in Jamaica.

From the illustration (Fig. 2) we can deduce that the bird is immature, based on its black wing-tips and black beak, like the specimen collected by March. The label is correct in identifying the bird as the Summer (Blue-wing'd) Goose of Edwards (Houston *et al.* 2003) as in 1973 the AOU combined the two species, Blue Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) and Snow Goose (then *C. hyperborea*), into one, *C. caerulescens* (AOU 1973). The genus *Chen* was subsequently lumped into *Anser* (AOU 2017). The illustration indicates by the amount of white on the bird that it is the white morph and is a trustworthy record having been observed by Robinson himself. Further, though Robinson does not state the month in which it was observed, it should be noted that he suggested that this was a winter vagrant, calling it "a bird of passage." It is therefore possible that the species may have occurred more frequently in Jamaica than the two records indicate. The fact that the bird is in the same position as Edwards' illustration, and the rock on which it stands is similar to that drawn by Edwards and is used in more than one of his illustrations, would seem to indicate that he illustrated it subsequent to the observation.

Records, Checklists, and Field Guides

There is a difference between compiling checklists or field guides for bird watching and establishing records of species and their distribution. The latter is the material compiled by Cory (1889) and the check-lists of the AOU, while Bangs and Kennard (1920) set out to update records for Jamaica established by Sclater (1910). On the other hand, there are card checklists such as those compiled by Lisa Salmon in 1964 and the Gosse Bird Club in 1986 that do not include any geese. Then there is the growing number of visiting birders who require something more than a checklist—fuller descriptions of each species and where to find them, as in the books by Bond (1985), Raffaele *et al.* (2003), and Haynes-Sutton *et al.* (2009). In the latter two, the treatment of the three species is uneven (Table 1). However, there is another category of list: the web page for Avibase's checklist for Jamaica (Lepage 2019) that claims to "include all bird species found on Jamaica" and continues "I am pleased to offer these checklists as a service to birdwatchers." Presumably then it can be printed off and used while on a visit to the island. It seems debatable whether field guides or checklists should list species known only from records that are more than 100 yr old.

Conclusion

The primary source for the Orinoco Goose record is a specimen taken in 1865 and listed as “Accidental” (AOU 1998), while the source for the Canada Goose in Jamaica is Gosse’s 1847 work based on the word of Hill, as well as a mention in March’s notes (March and Baird 1864). However, no specimen exists and as the AOU (1998) states, “there are records in Jamaica . . . of questionable origin.” The Snow Goose is represented by a specimen in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, collected in Jamaica and prepared by March, and an excellent illustration and description in 1758 by Robinson, both examples being of immature individuals.

Acknowledgments

I thank Brian Schmidt of the Smithsonian Institution for his advice on the illustration and for photographs and details of the specimen. I particularly acknowledge Dr. Arnaud Lenoble of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, whose correspondence was invaluable. Thanks also to Dr. Susan Koenig, who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions, to the editor, to anonymous reviewers, and to the staff of the National Library of Jamaica who made the illustration available.

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Cite this article as:

Levy, C. 2019. Historical status of geese in Jamaica and an early record of a Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*). *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 32:53–56.