

Telephone calls reporting the sightings of unusual birds are becoming a more regular occurrence in our household as one of the tasks of the newsletter editor's life is the compiling of the bird sightings list for the Island Naturalist. On August 22nd, a call from Geoff Robinson of Tyne Valley led to a goose chase of a different kind. It started with Geoff reporting that a neighbour, Mr. George MacCaul, had called him regarding an unusual goose that landed with his flocks of domestic geese and ducks the day Hurricane Bob passed the west end of Prince Edward Island. As such storms often push birds considerably out of their normal ranges, I was expecting to hear of some unusual sightings but the description of this bird, a goose with a white head with two black bars on the back of its head and a mostly gray, barred body, had me perplexed. Geoff indicated that, when Mr. MacCaul and another neighbour could not find the goose in North American field guides, they started a search of other books and came up with an old encyclopedia illustration of a "barred" goose. The questions posed were, "Is this a barred goose?" and "If so, where did it come from?". The latter question was raised because the bird could fly very well and had no bands to indicate it was a captive bird. Furthermore, the Fish and Wildlife Division did not know of any such geese on Prince Edward Island.



Well, I figured the best way to tackle this one was to take each question in order. I had never heard of a barred goose and the description of a large grey goose with strong barring on the side and a white head with bars didn't bring birds to mind. As they had a tentative name, I checked it out first in Peterson's Field Guide to the Eastern Birds, then in Tuft's Birds of Nova Scotia, and finally in Godfrey's The Birds of Canada. All to no avail. Neither the name or a bird fitting the description was present. It was The Larouse Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe

that finally yielded an illustration that seemed to fit, namely, the Bar-headed Goose. This book noted that "escapes of this Asiatic goose were sometimes met with, usually in the company of other grey geese". While the author qualified it "as easily told from other geese" the size description did not seem to fit the bird's description. The search now led to waterfowl books for the world and there were none of these in my collection. A phone call to Donald Wilkinson helped out as he had Sir Peter Scott's book on the waterfowl of the world. It provided an illustration of the bird and showed no other similar geese with these markings. Several days later, conversations with Geoff Hogan and Ray Cooke and the consultations of other books indicated that the bird was indeed a Bar-headed Goose. Thanks to Geoff and Dorothy Robinson and George MacCaul, I was able to view a video of the bird taken by Geoff and then to view and photograph the bird.

The second question on where the bird originated now became important. The sighting of a "proven wild" Bar-headed Goose would bring birders from all over. The bird could fly very well. It was nervous and took to flight very quickly unless it was with the other geese. When it was with the other geese it could be pushed by walking slowly behind the flock. This trait is often exhibited by wild Canada Geese of the year. Because this bird breeds in the Himalaya Mountains and overwinters in southern India and Sri Lanka, the likelihood of it being an escapee was very high. Efforts to contact Hollis MacFadyen of the West Prince Bird Conservatory in Inverness to see if he did possess Bar-headed Geese