

A WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE RECORD FOR ALABAMA

By THOMAS Z. ATKESON

White-fronted geese are fairly common from Louisiana westward, but are rare east of the Mississippi River. Arthur H. Howell's "Birds of Alabama" cites no record but states only that the bird may sometimes occur in this State. Thomas A. Imhof, in the course of rewriting this book, has combed the State for records but found none except a statement from a fisherman at Coden that he shot a strange goose in the fall of 1955 that fitted the description of a white-front. However, there is one old sight record made at the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in 1942. Since this stands alone, it was considered best to document it as thoroughly as possible. With this in view, old diaries, notes, and reports at the refuge office were examined and Paul Bryan, of the Tennessee Valley Authority's Fish and Game Division, has done the same with his records.

In the early afternoon of March 11, 1942, the writer saw a flock of 27 small, dark geese feeding in a field of young oats near the mouth of Cave Springs Branch. This is a bottomland field, bounded on the north by the Tennessee River and on the south by Garth Slough and located in the northern edge of Morgan County about five miles east of Decatur. The birds were identified as white-fronts, and the writer returned to the refuge office and reported the incident to the manager and other personnel. On March 12 he again visited the field and again found the geese. On March 13, in company with the late Robert J. Wheeler, then a Conservation Department biologist, and J. B. Barbaree, then State warden assigned to Morgan County and now a supervisor of conservation officers stationed at Union Springs, the field was again visited and the geese again examined carefully.

On March 14 the field was again visited, this time in company with Bryan, and the flock was still present. On March 15 the writer left the refuge to enter military service, but Bryan's notes showed that he visited the field alone on that date and saw seven of the birds.

None of the observers concerned doubted the identification. The geese were seen at times at distances no greater than 75 yards through good 7 x 35 B. & L. binoculars. They were seen on land, in flight, and on

water, and were frequently heard calling. They were carefully checked against a Peterson's Field Guide and other reference books. At the time of the observation Canada geese were present in the same locality. Blue geese and snow geese, in both juvenile and adult plumages, had been present throughout the late fall. The blotched bellies, the white bands at bases of bills, and the distinctive calls ruled out the possibility that these were juvenile blue geese. The writer had some familiarity with white-fronted geese, having examined them at close range in Louisiana.

The question has been posed why, with refuge employees aware of the rarity of this bird in the East, no specimen was taken. Personnel have always been reluctant to collect on the sanctuary, since this is subject to misunderstanding by the public. The writer was preparing to leave for military service. Then, too, Wheeler was, at that time, just beginning to build up a regular concentration of wintering geese. It was assumed that the white-fronts, having found the sanctuary, would return. Through the years following, the wintering goose flock on Wheeler Refuge has gradually increased until it numbers over 20,000. These have been regularly and carefully scanned for the possible inclusion of white-fronts, but none have been found.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge
Decatur, Alabama