

**FULVOUS WHISTLING DUCK (*DENDROCYGNA BICOLOR*) AND CACKLING GOOSE  
(*BRANTA CANADENSIS MINIMA*)  
SEEN AT LAKELAND FARMS**

Bill Summerour

In recent years Lakeland Farms, located a few miles south of Marion in the Blackbelt country of south-central Alabama, has become somewhat of a refuge for small numbers of wintering waterfowl.

Protection, a nucleus of stocked Canada Geese, numerous farm ponds, and a food supply of green winter wheat fields, has attracted a growing number of wild Canadas, a small population of Snow Geese and a scattering of ducks. Periodically, some of the lakes are drained to harvest catfish and the resultant mudflats can at times be productive for shorebirds.

Lane Merchant of Atlanta and I visited Lakeland Farms on 4 March, which was a gray, stormy day with low clouds and periods of rain. As we drove up to one of the lakes and stopped the truck, we noticed a long-necked duck standing at the edge of the lake with its head held high and eyeing us warily. It struck me immediately as a whistling duck which was confirmed seconds later when the bird sprang into the air, revealing its conspicuous white rump, long legs and outstretched neck held at a low angle to the body. The bird flew about 30 meters and splashed down among a raft of coots. This was a surprising find in this part of the state since Fulvous Whistling Ducks (*Dendrocyna bicolor*) are rare mostly in late summer or fall on the Gulf Coast of Alabama and even more unusual inland.

We observed the bird for about half an hour until our attention was drawn to a flock of Snow Geese that dropped in from low hanging clouds just ahead of a wall of rain and landed in a green field several hundred meters away. We decided to pull away from the whistling duck and check the geese for a while.

There was about 20 Snow Geese in the flock, about half of which were blue phase and half white birds. With them, but standing away from the group, was another surprise, a White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*), also unusual for this area. After studying the White-fronted Goose and analyzing each white-phase Snow Goose in tiring detail to make sure there were no Ross' in the flock, we turned our attention to looking for other birds of interest.



Fulvous Whistling Duck, Lakeland Farms

Photo by Bob Sargent

We went back to check on the whistling duck, and I noticed among a flock of Canada Geese on the pond a goose that was conspicuous because of its diminutive size. I put the Questar on it and determined that it was a Cackling Goose (*Branta canadensis minima*) the smallest subspecies of the five to ten geographical races of the Canada Goose (depending on the taxonomist) and distinguished by its stubby bill, small, almost mallard size, and dark breast.

A follow-up check of the records on several refuges in Alabama and discussions with observers around the state revealed that no one knew for certain if this subspecies of Canada Goose had in fact ever been seen in the state.

Actually, the bird is so small that it stands out readily in a crowd and should be easy to spot. Most smallish geese are probably passed over or generalized as "*hutchinsii*" or the little Richardson's Goose (*B.c. hutchinsii*), which is also about the size of *minima*. But there is a noticeable difference in the two, in that *hutchinsii* has a light breast and *minina* a distinctly dark breast, so dark, in fact, that the black neck collar almost merges into the sooty brown breast, making the color of the breast about the same shade as that of the back and giving the bird an overall dark appearance.

The Crackling Goose and Richardson's Goose are so distinctive that it is worth the effort to look for them among the flocks of Canadas that winter on refuges and other protected areas scattered over Alabama. The call of *minima* is a high pitched cackle which gives the bird its name and stands out from the familiar resonant of honking of Canadas.

The Cackling Goose breeds in Western Alaska and this individual obviously had strayed far from its normal wintering grounds in California, just as Ross' Geese occasionally do. Bill Summerour, *Biology Dept., Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, AL 36265*