

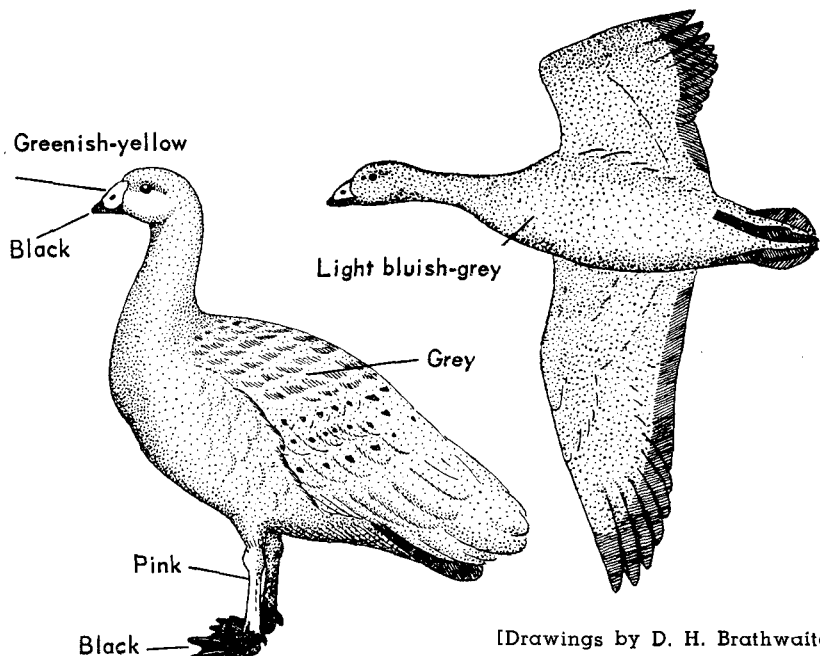
THE CAPE BARREN GOOSE, (*CEREOPSIS NOVAEHOLLANDIAE* LATHAM) IN NEW ZEALAND

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There are eleven species of Anatidae in New Zealand of which seven are native. Another fourteen have been recorded either as temporary residents or as natives already extinct before European settlement began. Since that time, only one fully-resident species has become extinct (Williams 1964).

Among the temporary residents the Cape Barren Goose is unique in that it has been introduced by man and has apparently also reached this country unaided. Because it may, like some other species from Australia in recent years, eventually establish itself here permanently, I have prepared this note to prompt others to report on past and future sightings.

The most recent and valuable summary of the taxonomy, range, numbers and ecology in Australia of *Cereopsis* has been made by Frith (1967). The species is the sole representative of the tribe Cereopsini (subfamily Anserinae) and is, perhaps, related to the



CAPE BARREN GOOSE (Both Sexes alike)

extinct New Zealand flightless goose, *Cnemidornis*. Its present distribution is on islands off the coast of southern Australia, from the western end of the Great Australian Bight to the eastern end of Bass Strait. It is more common on the smaller islands, presumably because these are less modified and disturbed. Though range and numbers were originally greater than at present, Frith believes that the population of 5000-6000 is currently increasing. Cape Barren Geese occur in small flocks and feed, mainly on grasses by grazing on land or along the edges of lakes and seashores. In parts of their range they sometimes cause very localised damage to crops (Anon. 1968).

Importations were made to New Zealand in 1869, 1871 and 1912 (Thomson 1922). The first two came to nothing, but the third — made by the Otago Acclimatisation Society — was at least temporarily successful: The single pair bred at the Government Poultry Farm at Milton and some of the offspring were sent to the Society's aviary at Clinton where they too, bred, after reaching the age of three years.

In 1914 four were liberated at the head of Lake Hawea and five young were reared there in 1916. A year later the birds apparently bred again at Lake Hawea and a pair from Clinton was liberated at Minarets Station, Lake Wanaka. The Annual Reports of the Otago Acclimatisation Society (from which these details have been obtained) contain no other explicit references to the birds breeding in the wild, though there were brief comments about them "doing well" and being seen about the liberation areas. The last statement is in the Report for 1923: "A few Cape Barren Geese can be seen at the head of Lake Hawea and in the Lake Wanaka District." Two years earlier the Society had discontinued breeding the species in captivity because it was considered too tame for sport. The remaining stock of four was disposed of by sending two to the Wellington Zoo and two to the Dunedin Botanical Gardens. Apparently birds not liberated in previous years or kept for breeding were given to private persons and their fate is unknown.

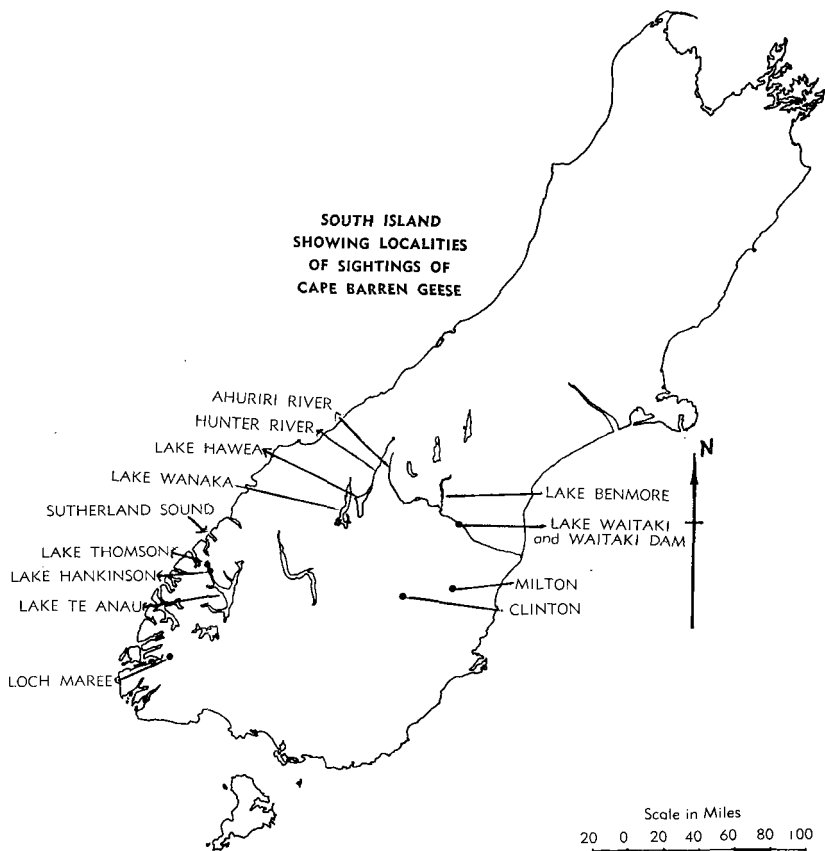
Two residents in the liberation areas (Tanfield, pers. comm.) recall that the geese increased in numbers until, in 1927, according to one of his informants, there were 27. They were subject to illegal hunting and the last was seen in the Hunter Valley about 1946. This statement agrees well with one by Sutherland (1943) to the effect that, in 1940 or 1941, there were five or six birds, including some young on the Hunter River, some of which may have been shot. With this, the history of the population of Cape Barren Geese known to have been introduced appears to come to an end.

Other reports of the species in New Zealand apparently refer to birds carried over the 1300 miles from Australia by the prevailing westerly or north-westerly weather systems (as have other Australian species from time to time — Williams, 1963, p. 56). However, the birds concerned may have been strays or descendants from the Wanaka-Hawea population.

Two were seen on Lake Thomson, west of the Middle Fiord of Lake Te Anau in 1934; and in mid-March 1947 two were reported from Loch Maree in southwestern Fiordland. Three months later, two were seen on Lake Hankinson (Vercoe 1947). Lake Thomson

is about 100 miles south of the Hunter River and about 50 miles north of Loch Maree. Lake Hankinson is about 5 miles east of Lake Thomson. All these lakes are closely surrounded by mountains and by beech forest (*Nothofagus* spp.) to the water's edge. Such habitat is very different from that typical for the species. However, the open pastoral or tussock-covered flats and mountain sides around Lakes Hawea and Wanaka are a little more like the Australian environment. The occurrence of birds in untypical habitat adds weight to the supposition that those seen in Fiordland were vagrants from across the Tasman Sea.

No more sightings were recorded until Keillor in 1966 (pers. comm.) gave what I believe to be reliable reports of these geese being seen in May of that year: "A single bird standing among the boulders a short distance from the edge of the Ahuriri River. . . . It was the same shade of blue as the stones . . . its wing-beat was slow compared with that of the introduced Canada goose."



"Three light blue geese on the north shore of Lake Waitaki, a short distance from the power house."

"Three light blue geese flying up the Waitaki River towards the Waitaki Dam. They had a slow wing-beat and wings the same shape as a delta-winged plane."

"Seven geese in the Benmore area. They were two shades of blue, a lighter shade under the wings."

"Five pale blue geese on Lakes Waitaki and Benmore, smaller than Canada Geese."

As all these records refer to localities within a 30-mile stretch of the same river system and were made during one short period, they probably refer to members of one flock. In this particular area the Waitaki River, its tributary the Ahuriri and the associated hydro-electric lakes Waitaki and Benmore closely resemble ecologically the Hawea-Wanaka district.

The most recent report is another from Fiordland: Early in 1967 one goose was seen on Sutherland Sound, an arm of the sea surrounded by beech forest, about 25 miles north of Lake Hankinson (Axbey, pers. comm.).

Only careful observation will now show whether a small breeding population still exists in this country in north or north-western Otago and whether dispersals from this population give rise to the birds recorded from Fiordland. If all those seen during the last 20 years had been carried over from Australia it is a little surprising that others have not made some landfalls in the northern half of the South Island or the southern half of the North, where habitat should be at least equally as favourable as in Fiordland or Otago and where the chances of being reported would be much greater.

In the hope that this account may prompt the reporting of other sightings, here is a brief description of the species:—

The general body colour is grey with small dark brown feathers on the upper surface of the wings. In flight, the underside of the tail is noticeably dark. The bill is short and dark and there is a yellowish-green fleshy covering around the nostrils. The legs and feet are pink and the toes black. The voice is a pig-like grunt and body size is smaller than that of a Canada Goose and larger than that of a Paradise Duck. Dorward (pers. comm.) warns that, in Australia, Cape Barren Geese have been confused with White-faced Herons (*Ardea novaehollandiae*) and adds that there is an unconfirmed report of these geese having been seen in Tierra del Fuego.

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