

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

Like southern California’s other geese, the White-fronted was a common winter visitor in the 19th century, before uncontrolled hunting took its toll. Another steep decline of the Pacific coast population took place in the 1970s and 1980s (Ely and Dzubin 1994), and no recovery from it is evident in southern California. The White-fronted remains scarce and is now the goose least often seen in San Diego County.

Winter: The Greater White-fronted Goose is noted in San Diego County every year, but its numbers may be low—only four in 2001–2002. It is more likely to be seen in San Diego County in a small flock than as scattered individuals. Most occur on lakes with grassland or marsh vegetation adjacent to them, but a few visit lawns or salt marshes (one at Kendall–Frost Marsh, Mission Bay, Q8, 29 December 2001–7 January 2002, M. Billings). Locations are mainly in the coastal lowland but scattered over the coastal slope. From 1997 to 2002, the only sites where the species showed up repeatedly were Guajome Lake (G7; up to three on 4 January 2001, S. Grain), Lake Henshaw (G17; up to 15 from 9 to 24 December 2000, R. Linfield), and Sweetwater Reservoir (S12; up to 17 from 18 December 1999 to 1 January 2000, P. Famolaro).

Migration: Even within Alaska, different populations of the White-fronted Goose follow different migration schedules. In both spring and fall, those breeding around Bristol Bay and wintering in northwestern mainland Mexico migrate much earlier than those breeding in the Yukon–Kuskokwim delta (Ely and Dzubin 1994). The former are presumably responsible for records in San Diego County as early as 22 September (1985, 15 flying south at Point Loma, J. O’Brien, AB 40:158, 1986). Sightings of 50 over Palomar Mountain 29 January 1978 (B. Cord), 50 flying west over Warner Valley (G18) 15 January 1999, and two flying west out of Carrizo Gorge (R27) 11 February 2001 (P. Unitt) match this population’s northward migration schedule in midwinter and suggest that, to some extent, the White-fronted Goose uses San Diego County as a route to cross to the Pacific coast, paralleling the Black Brant. A flock of geese heard at night flying north over the intersection of highways S2 and S22 (G20) 22 January 2002 were most likely migrating White-fronted as well (J. R. Barth). Late for spring were one at the Borrego Springs Country Club (G24) 28 March 1999 (P. D. Ache; only record for the Anza–Borrego Desert), one

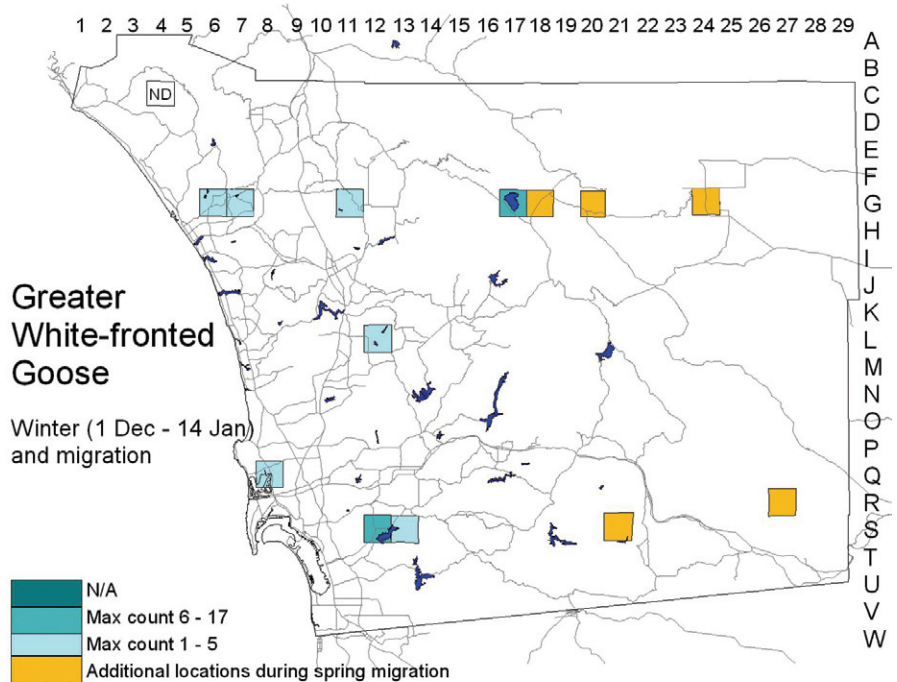


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

along the Silver Strand (T9) 20 April 1974 (J. L. Dunn), and one at Santee Lakes (P12) 13 April–5 May 2003 (M. B. Mulrooney, M. Hastings).

Conservation: The White-fronted Goose’s first population crash probably took place largely by the end of the 19th century; Stephens (1919a) wrote that the species was only “formerly common.” Through the second half of the 20th century numbers seen in San Diego County remained at about the same meager trickle. The 6 and 17 at Sweetwater Reservoir in 1997 and 1999, respectively, gave the San Diego Christmas bird count its largest totals ever.

Taxonomy: A definitive treatment of the subspecies of the Greater White-fronted Goose in North America has still not been published. One question is whether the size and color differences between the small geese breeding in western Alaska (*A. a. frontalis* Baird, 1858) and the larger ones breeding in northern Alaska and Canada are sufficient to define two subspecies. Another question is the application



of the oldest name for a North American White-fronted Goose, *A. a. gambelli* Hartlaub, 1852. Because the type locality for this name is Texas, logically it represents the northern (and only eastern) population, but because the original description emphasized the bird's large size, the name is often used also for the Tule Goose, the very large,

dark subspecies breeding around Cook Inlet, Alaska, and wintering in the Sacramento delta, designated *A. a. elgasi* by Delacour and Ripley (1975). Whatever name is applied to them, the birds migrating to and through southern California are from the western Alaska populations of relatively small geese.