

This month's field problem is compounded by the fact that the photograph depicts three different-looking birds. Although it is fairly obvious that all of the birds are geese, their varying coloration and size make their identification potentially more complicated.

The pure white plumage and black wing tips on the bird in the rear of the photograph make that individual readily identifiable as either an adult Snow Goose or a Ross' Goose in the white morph. Both by association and by the presence of black wing tips and dusky feathering on the heads, necks, and backs, it is possible to identify the remaining two birds as immatures of either of the same two species. But how do we account for the dramatic difference in size between the two immature birds? Are two different species present in the picture?

At this point, it is important to focus on the white individual in the photograph. A look at its large size compared with the smaller immature, its rather long, graceful neck, and its flat-headed and large-billed appearance all immediately distinguish it from the Mallard-sized Ross' Goose—a western species unrecorded in Massachusetts, but one that is appearing in the East with increasing frequency. Less obvious in the photograph, but nonetheless visible, is the appearance of a "grin patch" on the side of the adult goose's bill. This feature is characteristic of the Snow Goose but is lacking in the stubby-billed Ross' Goose, which also has a more abrupt forehead and a more rounded configuration to the top of the head. So what about the little guy?

Snow Geese are polytypic; that is, they occur in two distinct and recognizable subspecies—the "lesser" Snow Goose and the "Greater" Snow Goose—each with a geographically distinct Arctic breeding range. These forms differ significantly in size (26-30 inches compared to 29-33 inches) and ordinarily have distinct wintering areas. The majority of the Snow Geese occurring in Massachusetts are "Greater" Snow Geese that mainly spend the winter on the mid-Atlantic coast; "Lesser" Snow Geese migrate principally through the interior and western United States and winter in the West and along the Gulf Coast. However, a few "Lesser" Snow Geese, including the dark morph form ("Blue Goose"), do use the Atlantic coastal flyway and regularly occur in

Massachusetts in association with the more numerous "Greater" Snow Geese. And that is what's going on in the picture.

The Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) in the picture generated considerable excitement last fall when the smallest individual was thought initially to be a possible Ross' Goose. The birds were photographed in Rochester by Michael LaBossiere.



## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Linda M. Gray



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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