

Encounters with Bean Geese

The Bean Goose is probably the scarcest of the "grey geese" to occur in Kent. It is an enigmatic species, for many years lumped with the Pink-footed Goose and in Kent at least having a rather odd history. Up until 1976 all records in the county were considered to be of the 'taiga' race *Anser fabalis fabalis*, named after the region of boreal forest which borders the Arctic from Scandinavia to eastern Siberia and where this race breeds.

Since 1976 it has become apparent that the vast majority of Kent records refer to the smaller 'tundra' race *A.f.rossicus*, which breeds on the coastal tundra bordering the Arctic Ocean, occupying a similar niche to the Pink-footed Goose. What circumstances account for this shift in the race recorded in the county is difficult to establish but today it is the Tundra Bean Goose we expect and the Taiga Bean Goose is a rare bird indeed.

Part of the difficulty comes from the challenges of separating Bean Geese from other Grey geese, and then from discriminating the two races. Finding a Bean in a mixed flock of Grey Geese can be tricky; to my eyes they are earthy-brown and rather uniform in tone. Orange legs are a good clue, but do not rule out White-fronted Geese or even some Greylags. An all dark bill is always worth a second look and I have noticed that some birds show a contrasting dark eye patch on an otherwise plain head. Probably the best way to clinch the ID as a Bean Goose is to look for the white tertial fringes, a character not shared by other grey geese. Beans also show a narrow white tail margin, but this can be hard to see on the ground and this is also a feature of the otherwise dissimilar White-fronted Goose.



Sketch book page – Tundra Bean, Britton Farm, Seaton, Kent February 2011

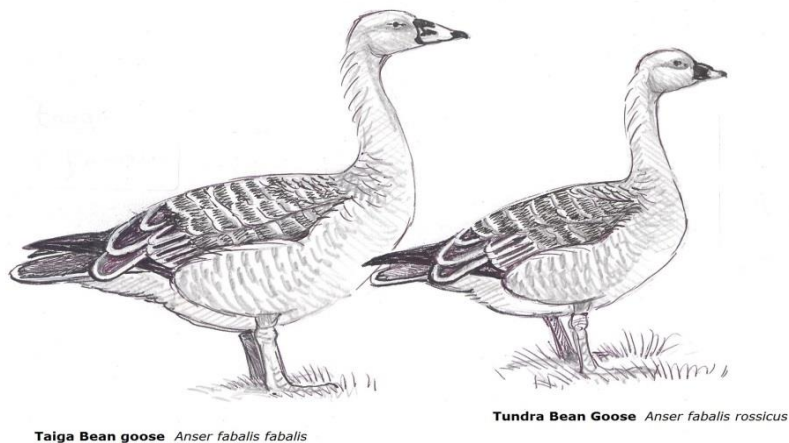


Tundra Bean A.f.rossicus
12 Feb 2011; near Seaton

Sketchbook page – head portrait showing bill pattern and 'eye patch'

The key to separating the two races in the field is a combination of structural and plumage characteristics. Taiga Bean Geese (*fabalis*) are large, bulky geese approaching a Greylag in size. They usually show a long neck and rectangular head with a long wedge-shaped bill, giving a silhouette reminiscent of a Whooper Swan.

By contrast, Tundra Bean Geese (*rossicus*) are smaller and more compact, structurally similar to the Pink-footed Goose but with a somewhat thicker neck. They show a rounder and more domed head-shape and a short, triangular



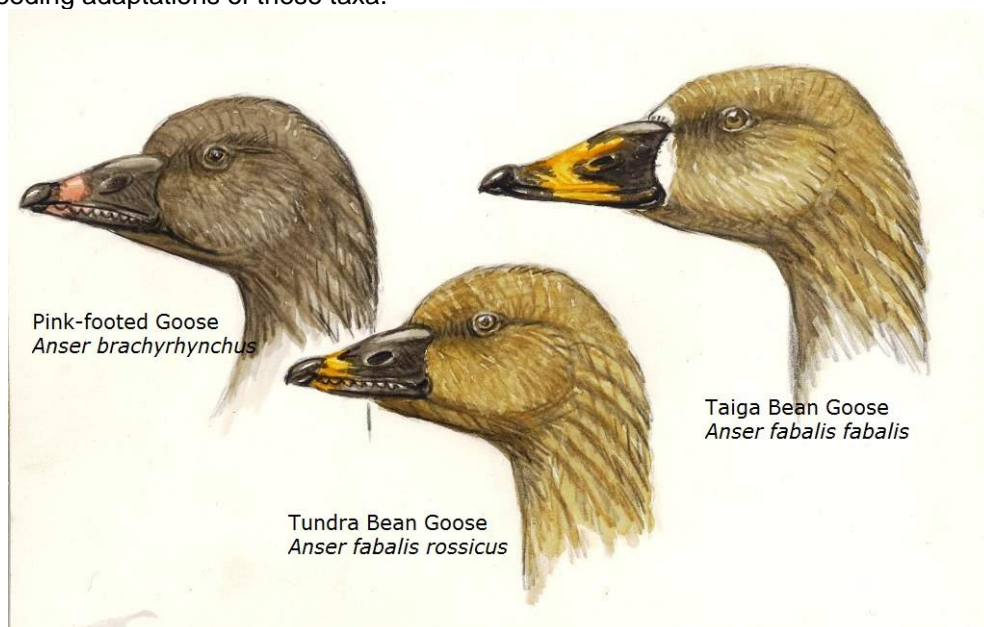
Taiga Bean goose *Anser fabalis fabalis*

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser fabalis rossicus*

bill.

Plumage features are similar but subtle; both are large brownish geese with orange legs, showing an orange and black bill. Both races can show some white feathering at the base of the bill although in my experience this is more frequently seen on Taiga Beans. The amount of orange can also vary individually, but generally Taiga Beans show more orange than black, while Tundra Beans are usually show mostly black bills with the orange restricted to a narrow band.

There is a further structural difference in that the Tundra Beans show a distinct 'grinning patch' along the cutting edge of the mandible where the serrated edges are clearly visible in the closed bill. Taiga Beans do not show this feature on the closed bill. Incidentally, this feature is also apparent in Pink-footed Geese and in one of the eastern races of the Bean Goose (*A.f. serrirostris*); the name *serrirostris* translates as 'saw-billed' and this feature is likely to be associated with different feeding adaptations of these taxa.



Head and bill pattern, Bean and Pinkfooted Goose

The taxonomy of the eastern races has recently been revised by our Dutch colleagues and they have split the known forms of Bean Goose into a somewhat different arrangement, but it seems unlikely that any vagrant individuals of these eastern races will be separable in the field any time soon - Watch this Space!!

Norman McCanch