

Dusky geese: an endangered genus

By Shannon Kelley
Of the Emerald

When is a dusky goose not a dusky? The five Western refuges in Oregon and Washington tried to solve this riddle and found the answer: When it is a Taverners goose.

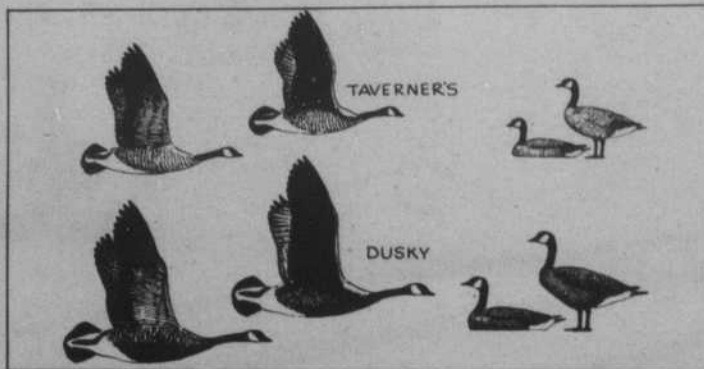
These two sub-species of the Canada goose are practically indistinguishable other than overall size and length of bill. The main difference is population. While the dusky goose population has plummeted to a dangerously low level, the Taverners are flourishing in number.

An earthquake in Alaska that destroyed the dusky's only breeding ground in the Copper River Delta, and extensive hunting last year, are reasons for the decline. Last year in Oregon and Washington, the dusky's numbered an estimated 19,300. By the end of the season the number dropped to about 11,900, according to John Cornely, biologist for the five refuges (including Ankeny, Basket Slough, Sauvie Island and Finley in Oregon and Ridgefield in Washington.) The Taverners, however, are past the 50,000 mark, Cornely said.

Therefore, the staffs of the refuges were left with a decision: How to feed the hungry hunters without endangering the dusky's.

"We had to find out ways to take the pressure off the dusky's and transfer some of that pressure on the Taverners," says Cornely.

Because it is so difficult for hunters to distinguish



Graphic courtesy Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

Size and bill length are key physical differences between Taverner's and dusky geese, sub-species of the Canada goose.

between the dusky's and Taverners, the refuge staffs' first reaction was to close all goose hunting this season, says Cornely.

But, because of pressure from hunters and a high number of Taverners an experimental season plan was initiated.

The season has been reduced from three to two months. The bag limit is reduced to two geese, but only one can be a dusky. If a hunter's first bag is a dusky, he or she would be wise to quit, according to Cornely.

An extra dusky can mean a fine of \$50 or more, said Pete Cornacchia, outdoor recreation writer for The Register Guard.

Administrators at the refuges will give out information and pictures to help the hunters distinguish between the two types of geese.

The experiment may have problems, however. Cornacchia says that because it is so difficult to distinguish between the two species, especially when the geese fly together in flocks or when visibility is not clear, many hunters that have shot a dusky may be tempted to avoid acknowledging this to officials.

Cornacchia also expressed concern for another sub-species, the cackler, that also resembles the dusky and Taverners geese.

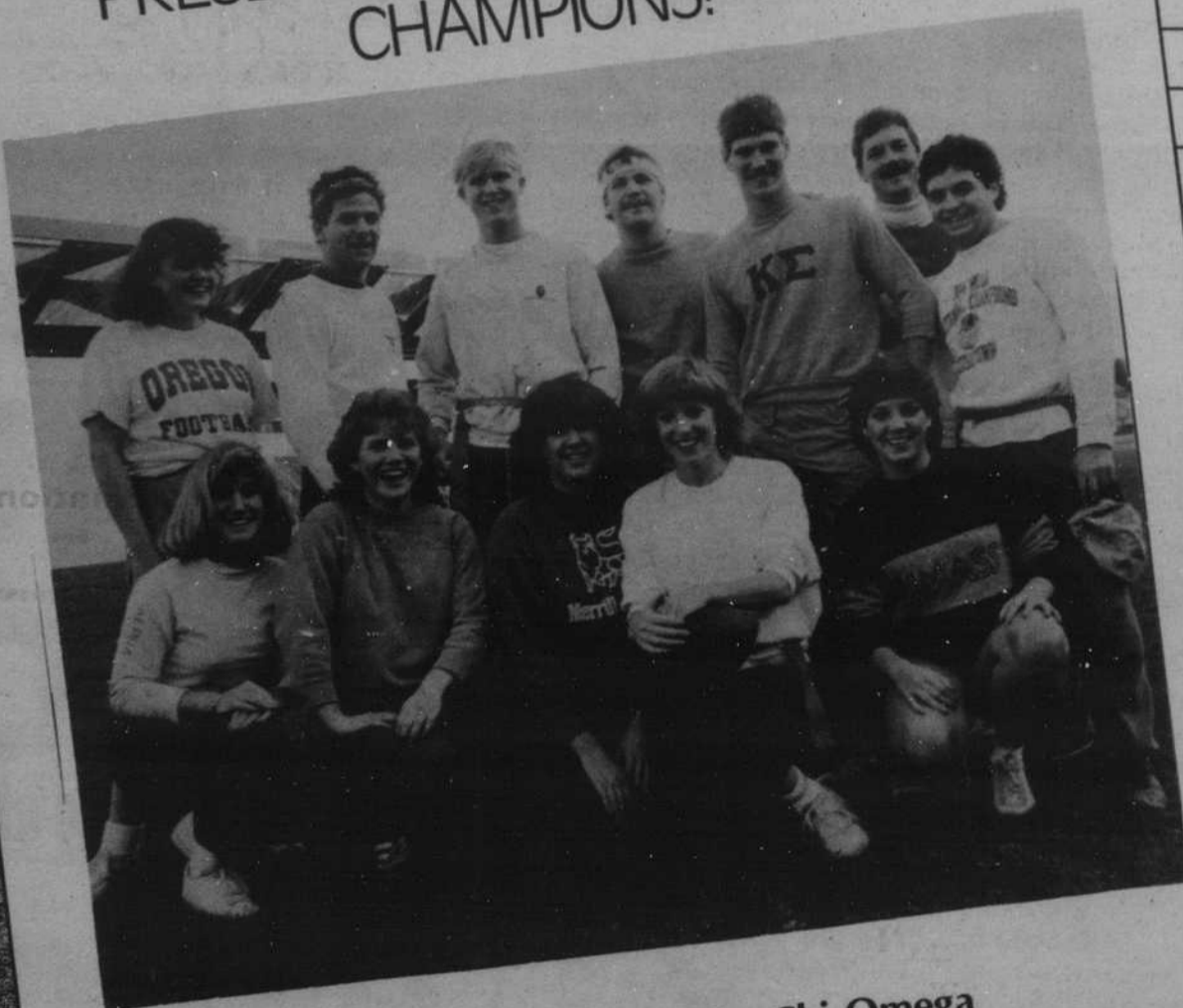
Because of the low count, cackler hunting is banned throughout the entire Pacific Flyway. Cornacchia believes that because the cacklers also fly with other species of geese, hunters will have an even more difficult time distinguishing species.

However, it appears the refuges have all the bases covered. The experiment contains an "emergency clause", according to Ray Johnson, spokesperson for the Sauvie Island Refuge. Johnson said that if more than 16 percent or 350 dusky's are harvested, the season will be closed. Furthermore, Cornely says that whatever happens this season will set a precedent for next season.

"Next year all the western refuges may close, (for goose hunting) depending on what happens this year," says Cornely.

This season, goose hunting runs from mid-October to the beginning of January.

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