

# THE HOLLINGWORTH GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GEESE

## AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR REMARKABLE SAGA

by Simon Hitchen and Ian McKerchar



(Photo by Simon Hitchen)

White-fronted Goose has always maintained a very scarce status in Greater Manchester, with birds generally involving overflying skeins, including odd ones or twos in Pink-footed Geese skeins and 'downed' birds during national influxes of the European *A. a. albifrons* race. It was with understandable judgment therefore, that when 2 Greenland *A. a. flavirostris* race birds appeared associating with Canada Geese in the Hollingworth Lake/Akzo Pond area during the winter of late 1991, they were considered to be feral or escaped birds. This was not however, the first record of White-fronted Goose at Hollingworth Lake as there were two previous occurrences of wild birds, both involving large flocks (see below).

Their annual appearance as either single birds or a pair, in the Hollingworth area from 1991 until 1998, except for the winter 1993/1994, understandably continued to be treated as feral/escapes by Rochdale recorders and it was not until 28th October 1998 when a bird wearing a neck collar and leg ring (D1H) appeared at Akzo Pond, that alarm bells began to ring and a full reassessment of all White-fronts in the Rochdale area ensued.



Above: The neck-ringed bird of 1998 at Hollingworth Lake. (Videograb by Ian Kimber)

Information from A. A. Fox and M. A. Ogilvie revealed that the neck ringed bird D1H, had been first ringed as an adult at Wexford Slobs, Ireland in the early winter of 1993-4 and had subsequently been seen in Islay 1994-5, southern Iceland on 26th April 1996, Wexford again the following winter and then back at the same location in Iceland in April 1997. This led to the remarkable conclusion that the small numbers of birds present from 1991 were in fact truly wild birds and were associating with Canada Geese as their nearest congeners. In the 1997 County Bird Report the appearance of a pair of Greenland White-fronts with 4 juveniles in the Rochdale area in late 1997 were considered to be feral or escapes and was met with the understandable comment "where were they in the summer months and where did they breed?"- well now we knew!



Above: It might look feral, but it isn't! A real, wild White-front enjoys a paddle at Hollingworth Lake. (Photo by Simon Hitchen)

A full account of Greenland White-fronted Goose occurrences in the Hollingworth Lake and Akzo Pond area is listed below, although it is understandably 'patchy' in parts due to lack of recording given their initial status.

1984: 17 flew over on 14th December (which was at time only the fourth county record since 1978), were not assigned to race.

1987: 58 flying south-west on 12th December were not assigned to race, however 2 of which stayed until 14th December, roosting on the lake were of the European race *A. a. albifrons*.

1991/1992: 2 immatures from November 1991 remained until the early weeks of 1992.

1993: single bird, 2nd January.

1994: a single bird from 27th October 1994 to early 1995 at least.

1995/1996: The single bird from 1994 was seen into early 1995 at least (certainly until the 23rd January) and 2 birds returned from 15th October 1995 to the year end, although the recording of them apparently being present throughout 1996 is likely an assumption, as data reveals they were only seen during the winter periods at either end of the year.

1997: 2 birds from 1996 present until at least 6th April. Presumably the same pair reappeared 22nd October accompanied by 4 juveniles and were present until the year end.

1998: 2 birds from 28th October until the year end.

1999: 5 birds present until 25th April.

2000/2001: single 27th November, then flew to Ogden Reservoir where it remained until 7th December, then Hollingworth area until it visited Ogden again on 26th January. Seen several times at the end of March and the beginning of April in the Hollingworth area.

2002/2003: single from 5th November 2002, present until at least March 8th 2003.

2004/2005: single from 4th November 2004, remained until 27th April 2005.



Above: A wintering Greenland White-front at Akzo Pond associating with feral Canada Geese- beggars can't be choosers! (Photo by Simon Hitchen)

### WHERE TO FIND YOUR WHITE-FRONT'S



Above: Akzo Pond, a wintering White-front's wonderland! (Photo by Simon Hitchen)

The White-fronts tend to range widely around the Littleborough area, often associating with Canada Geese and predicting where they will be at any given time is difficult, however, early afternoon tends to be the best chance of them being at Akzo Pond and they sometimes roost at Hollingworth Lake. Occasionally they are seen flying over to the east of Littleborough and they have also visited Ogden Reservoir and Watergrove Reservoir from time to time.

If it is not possible to see the Canada Goose flock from the road at Akzo Pond, you can walk through the Hawthorn hedge alongside the old Akzo chemicals works to view fields further north that aren't readily visible. It is however, if doing this, important to take care not to disturb the Geese.

### INDIVIDUAL BELLY MARKINGS

With our current knowledge, it appears that the black belly markings ('belly bars') on the majority of White-fronted Geese do not alter significantly with age or moult and so it may be possible, in our case at least, to determine if some of the individuals occurring in the Littleborough area are returning birds or not, as long as their belly markings are appreciatively dissimilar.

Compare below the images of Greenland White-fronts taken at Hollingworth Lake/Akzo Pond, taking particular note of the dark belly markings.



Above: Adult Greenland White-fronted Goose, Akzo Pond, 25.11.04. Notice that there are only two obvious 'belly bars' continuing up onto the flanks. (Photo by Simon Hitchen)



Above: The same bird/location/date as above, with the two 'belly bars' obvious, notice however how the different angle and posture of the bird (not to mention Simon's shaky hand!) has altered the appearance of the 'belly bars' slightly. (Photo by Simon Hitchen)



Above: Adult Greenland White-fronted Goose, Akzo Pond, 02.11.06. Notice here the three obvious 'belly bars', clearly a different individual to the 2004. (Photo by Rob Adderley)

## SUMMARY

Quite why they chose the Littleborough area to become one of England's only regular wintering sites of Greenland White-fronted Goose is anyone's guess (admittedly it is a rather pleasant area), although we have speculated that those two immatures in 1991 were 'lost' birds that associated with the increasingly large Canada Goose flock in the area, like the occasional 'lost' Pink-feet that have done similar at sites within Greater Manchester in more recent years. These immatures are likely to have found the unimproved marginal pasture encountered in the Littleborough area similar to their natural winter quarters and it is they or their descendants that have been those occasional winter birds since, while it is entirely feasible that the ringed bird in Wexford 1993/4 (D1H) was actually one of these immatures from 1991 as there were, intriguingly, no sightings from Hollingworth Lake in the winter 1993/4.

Either way their remarkable saga is undoubtedly a significant occurrence and long may their dynasty continue, although the recent status of Greenland White-fronted Goose appears to be in somewhat of a catastrophic decline. Since a population explosion in the early nineties it has been speculated that their steady decline in breeding success is due to the arrival of Greater Canada Geese as a breeding species in Greenland which are out-competing the White-fronts as a breeding species. Should this continue, it does not bode well for the future of Hollingworth as a wintering site for the species.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

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