

Acceptance of Barnacle Goose to the Official List of the Birds of Pennsylvania

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At its annual meeting on 20 July 2008, the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee (PORC) followed through on a recent decision to reevaluate all records of Barnacle Goose in Pennsylvania, in light of recent changes in the status of this species in North America. This paper details the committee's rationale, the history of this species in North America and Pennsylvania and PORC's positions on it over the years, the results of the 2008 reevaluation, and the acceptance of the species in July 2008.

History of Barnacle Goose in North America

The complicated status of Barnacle Goose in North America is well known, and well documented. Though a detailed restating of the bird's history on this continent is beyond the scope of this paper, we detail the major events and arguments of the past few decades that are relevant to the decision to reevaluate this species' status in Pennsylvania. For the most up-to-date treatments of the species' history in North America, the reader is referred to Hanson (2004) and Sherony (2008), and, for a summary of some of the difficulties regarding Barnacle Goose provenance, to Brinkley (2002).

There are three recognized populations of Barnacle Goose, one of which breeds on the eastern coast of Greenland and winters in Scotland and western Ireland (Owen 1997). This population is often considered as the source of presumed vagrants that appear in northeastern North America. Each of these three populations is considered to be increasing. Twelve estimates of the size of the Greenland population made since 1959, consisting of surveys of wintering sites in Scotland and Ireland, show the Greenland population to be increasing, from a total of 9000 in 1959 to 54,000 in 2004 (Sherony 2008). The latest census, conducted 16-18 March 2008, totaled 70,501 birds (Mitchell et al. 2008). This apparently steady increase, which includes a near doubling of the 1988 total in 2008 (Mitchell et al. 2008), is coincident with an increase in the occurrence of Barnacle Goose in

North America over the past 30 years.

Barnacle Goose has long been on the American Birding Association's (ABA) Checklist, mainly on the strength of a specimen that was shot in the autumn of 1981 at Ladle Cove, Newfoundland, which was found to have been banded at two-plus years of age on Spitsbergen, Norway, 19 July 1977 (Montevocchi and Wells 1984). But for many years, and even to the present day, the ABA Checklist Committee considered the status of Barnacle Goose in North America to be uncertain, and classified the species as a casual or very rare winter visitor to southeastern Canada and the northeastern and mid-Atlantic United States (Pranty et al. 2008), despite some 157 reports of Barnacle Goose in this region during the period 1979–2004 (Sherony 2008). Ninety percent of these reports are from fourteen northeastern and coastal states and provinces. Pennsylvania contributed 34 of these records through 2004. Additionally, during the period 1878–2008, more than 270 reports from those states and provinces have appeared in national, state, provincial, and regional books and periodicals (Paul Hess and Marshall Iliff, unpub. data).

Obviously, the provenance of any unbanded Barnacle Goose in North America is suspect, given that the species is found in waterfowl collections and escapes are known to have occurred. But the difficulty in properly evaluating the species' status extends well beyond this relatively simple question.

The main arguments made against the natural origin of Barnacle Geese in North America were summed up well by Sherony (2008), who cited arguments articulated by A. J. Ryff (1984). Ryff argued that the Barnacle Goose's natural instinct is to migrate from Greenland to Europe, and that they were not known to leave Greenland in the face of a strong nor'easter, the most likely mechanism that might bring them to North American shores. At the same time, there were few known records of Barnacle Geese in western Greenland, the likely launching point for a stray headed for North America. Additionally, Pink-footed Goose, which

shares breeding grounds with Barnacle Goose in eastern Greenland and thus would also share the same flight path with Barnacle Goose en route to becoming a North American vagrant, is considerably more rare in North America than Barnacle Goose.

Ryff's final argument was to point out the issues associated with provenance. Though he certainly did not know of it in 1984, Ryff would have pointed to the now famous and illustrative tale of the family of six Barnacle Geese (2 adults and 4 juveniles) that appeared in Nova Scotia in September 1990 as "case in point" regarding the problematic Barnacle Goose. Their story warrants a quick retelling here. After the original discovery on Cape Sable Island, over the next three years, the group of six also appeared at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Bangor, Maine, Hopkinton, New Hampshire, and New Brunswick, New Jersey (Hanson 2004). It wasn't until after hundreds of birders from across the country had traveled to see these birds (Brinkley 2002) that it was discovered that the two adults had been released by a collector in Nova Scotia in 1989, and that they raised their four young on Cape Sable Island. Besides the difficulty in knowing how many years these individuals persisted in the region, the ghastly prospect was raised that the pair fledged yet more Barnacle Geese right here in North America, accounting for some, or maybe even most, of the sightings in the 1990s.

Despite these difficulties, there are also compelling arguments in favor of viewing Barnacle Geese in North America as truly wild vagrants. Again these arguments are detailed nicely by Sherony (2008) and are summarized here. If all Barnacle Geese in North America were escaped, the obvious concentration of the species in northeastern North America would not exist, for there would be a more even distribution of records across the continent. Instead, the tendency for Barnacle Geese to appear in the northeast more frequently than elsewhere is consistent with a pattern of natural vagrancy from Greenland. Additionally the timing of these sightings—primarily from November to



Plate 1: Barnacle Goose with Snow Goose, Buckingham Township, Bucks, 8 February 2002. PORC record 115-01-2002. On reevaluation in July 2008, the Committee accepted this record. (Photo by Alan Brady)

April—is also consistent with natural vagrancy. Additionally, Barnacle Geese have been documented in continental North America associating with geese that obviously originated from Greenland: both *flavirostris* Greater White-fronted Geese, and with collared Canada Geese that were determined to have been banded in Greenland.

But the event which truly changed the perception of Barnacle Goose in the eyes of records committees across the Northeast came in 2005, when a Barnacle Goose, banded as a juvenile in Islay, Scotland, on 9 November 2004, was shot in Hawkesbury, Ontario in November 2005 (Bain 2005, Sherony 2008). This record proved beyond any reasonable doubt that Barnacle Geese originating in Europe were indeed capable of appearing in inland North America. To that point, the only truly acceptable record for the ABA area was confined to the outer coast of Newfoundland, the site of so many unique North American strays that would be totally unexpected elsewhere on this continent. It was not long until state records committees, including Pennsylvania's, were back to the task of evaluating this species in a new light.

Status in Nearby States

Pennsylvania is of course not the only state or province to struggle with the challenge presented by the Barnacle Goose. Many states and provinces from eastern Canada to South Carolina have one or more reports, though the majority of reports have originated in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York.

Nearby state records committees

all take a conservative and cautious approach to Barnacle Goose. The Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC) accepted the species to its state list in 2002 and has subsequently accepted three additional reports (M. Rines, pers. comm., MARC website). The New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC) has accepted 11 reports but all with the caveat "origin unknown" (NYSARC website). This is similar to the approach of the Vermont Bird Records Committee (VBRC), which has five accepted records, the most recent being 25 and 28 March 2007. Four earlier reports dated May 1990, April 1996, October 1996, and October 1998 were accepted as "origin unknown". However the VBRC may be considering the acceptance of Barnacle Geese as wild birds (J. Nicholson, pers. comm.).

In a 2007 decision, the New Jersey Rare Birds Committee (NJRBC), using criteria similar to PORC (see below), reviewed all Barnacle Geese records back to 2000 and considered all records acceptable (B. Boyle, pers. comm.). The Avian Records Committee of Connecticut (ARCC) has one accepted record, an apparent adult present in Mansfield 4 December 2001 through the first part of January 2002. Currently, ARCC is no longer judging the status of any new records other than to make sure the identification is correct and to make sure there is no evidence of captive origin (M. Szantyr, pers. comm.).

The Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DC) has received 28 reports, but has reviewed only one, and considered the report "ID OK / ?? Origin" (P. Davis, pers. comm.). Virginia Avian Records Committee

(VARCOM) has 14 reports of which three have been reviewed and considered Category 3: "a bird that could well be of wild provenance" (E.S. Brinkley, pers. comm.). The Delaware Bird Records Committee (DBRC) has reviewed two reports and found them not acceptable because of questionable origin. West Virginia Bird Records Committee (WVBRC) has not reviewed any reports (M. Orsie, pers. comm.) and the Ohio Bird Records Committee (OBRC) does not include Barnacle Goose on the official Ohio list; ORBC does not regard any records of the species as being conclusively attributable to wild birds. A number of sightings of Barnacle Goose that seem consistent with natural occurrence have been made in Ohio by reliable observers, but have been formally unreported because previous reports had been seemingly brushed aside, rather than examined objectively (N. Keller and B. Whan, pers. comm.).

As has been mentioned, the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) has the unique and enviable situation of an accepted record of a Barnacle Goose that was banded in Scotland and subsequently shot in 2005 in the province. All other reports of this species in Ontario have been considered escapes. One member of OBRC expressed surprise by the interest this species has generated in adjacent states, where there appears to be endless argument that some or most birds could be wild. (A. Wormington, pers. comm.). That position appears to be the most conservative possible: without the direct evidence of a band that can be traced to origin, no Barnacle Goose can be reasonably assumed to be of wild origin.

History of Barnacle Goose in Pennsylvania

Indeed, PORC held an equally conservative position on the status of Barnacle Goose for many years, though this stance was rarely unanimous. Most individual incarnations of PORC were divided on the evaluation of this species, and rare was the committee that agreed unanimously not to accept records of unbanded Barnacle Geese. Some records even achieved a majority of votes to accept (4/3 or 5/2), but the necessary 6/1 or 7/0 vote to accept was never obtained.

Part of the committee's hesitation stemmed from caution similar to that expressed by other records committees

in the region. Except in a few cases where the identification was actually in question, the dissenting votes were always on the grounds of questionable origin (for example, Kwater 1992). It seemed that this stalemate might never be resolved, despite at least 41 records and reports of Barnacle Goose now in the annals of Pennsylvania's history through 2008.

It should be stressed again that it was the individual that was banded in Scotland and shot in Ontario that fundamentally changed the perception of Barnacle Goose in the eyes of PORC. With Pennsylvania very much in the middle of the controversy, it now seems very reasonable that some of the Barnacle Geese that appear here, perhaps even most of them, can be considered wild birds. During its July 2007 meeting, the committee therefore determined to reevaluate all records in its archives, and did so in July 2008.

PORC Reevaluation—July 2008

The question of provenance surrounding out-of-range waterfowl is always a difficult one, and one which regularly draws disagreement among reasonable minds. Before reevaluating the records, the committee had to establish criteria by which records would be judged, and then apply these standards evenly to every record.

Some committee members argued for a strongly conservative stance, which would call for any record which did not specifically show the absence of all possible evidence of escape, either by description or by indisputable photograph, to be rejected. This would include records in which certain features could not be obtained even with best efforts; for instance, a bird seen only in water would not reveal the presence or absence of leg bands, and without this information, the record would be not acceptable. Others argued that this approach would lead inevitably to what was already the committee's historical stance, and as such would lead to all records being rejected. Ultimately the committee determined to handle Barnacle Goose as it would any other vagrant waterfowl. Since a pattern of vagrancy in northeastern North America has been proven for this species, the committee agreed that the standard of reevaluation should be no different than other odd waterfowl visiting Pennsylvania. Specifically, if the absence of evidence of captivity was

reasonably observed (but not necessarily "completely" observed), and if the bird appeared during the time and in the region expected for potential vagrants, then it should be considered a potential vagrant, and from there the specific circumstances would be evaluated.

The comparative example that was most frequently utilized during the discussion was that of the Cinnamon Teal. It is clear that Cinnamon Teal does exhibit a pattern of vagrancy in eastern North America, but the probability of finding a vagrant individual bearing a metallic USFWS band in Pennsylvania, which would conclusively prove the bird's authenticity, is vanishingly small. But this does not mean that all unbanded Cinnamon Teal should be rejected by the committee, and indeed, the species is on the state list by virtue of four accepted records, none of which involved a banded bird. It was agreed that Barnacle Goose records would be reevaluated according to the same standard.

The committee agreed to the following criteria:

1. The record should occur during a time when a vagrant Barnacle Goose can reasonably be expected to visit Pennsylvania (November to March, see Figure 1).

2. Written details must accompany the record and should specifically address all aspects observed that suggest whether the bird was at any time captive. These details include status of colored bands on the legs, state of the hind toes, plumage wear, clipped flight feathers, and the bird's wariness around humans.
3. The bird's behavior and association with other geese should be described if observed.
4. Photographs of an unbanded Barnacle Goose with no written support should not be accepted.

Results of Reevaluation

The July 2008 meeting was attended by five voting members: Eric Witmer, Jonathan Heller, Ben Coulter, Al Guarente, and Geoff Malosh. Non-voting Secretary Nick Pulcinella was also present. Voting members not present were Tom Johnson and Rick Wiltraut.

The details that follow represent all records of Barnacle Goose that the committee had evaluated prior to the July 2008 meeting, and each of these were put up to another vote by the five members present. All re-votes resulted in either a unanimous decision to



Plate 2: Barnacle Goose at Green Lane Reservoir, *Montgomery*, 7 March 2004. PORC record 115-01-2004. On reevaluation in July 2008, the Committee did not accept this record; documentation submitted consisted of a photo with no written description. (Photo by Elaine Ryan)



Plate 3: Barnacle Goose, Churchville Reservoir, Bucks, 15 January 2005. PORC record 115-01-2005. On reevaluation in July 2008, the Committee accepted this record. (Video grab by Devich Farbotnik)

accept (5/0), or a unanimous decision not to accept (0/5).

*Record 115-01-1989. One at Pymatuning Lake, Crawford, 28 January 1989. Original vote: 0/7. The bird had a color band on one leg, clearly suggesting captive origin. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class V.** The bird was probably an escape.*

*Record 115-02-1989. One at Peace Valley Park, Bucks, 4 February 1989. Original vote: 0/7. The bird was seen with “thousands” of Canada Geese which also included one *flavirostris* Greater White-fronted Goose. Though the written description mentioned that the bird was wary and did not have any bands, it did not describe the bird itself. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-B.** With no physical description of the bird in question, the record is unacceptable.*

*Record 115-01-1994. One at Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery, 13 to 17 March 1994. Original vote: 5/2 and 4/3. This bird was seen associating with thousands of Canada Geese and four Greater White-fronted Geese that were identified as *flavirostris*. Because it appeared in the company of Greenland white-fronts, most birders consider this the “definitive” Barnacle Goose record in Pennsylvania’s history, and indeed the record is often cited by*

authorities as an example of a record that was probably of a wild Barnacle Goose. Despite this, the original committee decision was to not accept, based on the bird’s uncertain origin (Pulcinella 1995). **July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class III** (August Mirabella, Gary Freed, George Franchois, Ron Grubb, Steve Farbotnik). Written details touched on all key points and the presence of *flavirostris* Greater White-fronted Geese was compelling. With this decision, this becomes the first accepted record of Barnacle Goose for Pennsylvania.

*Record 115-01-1996. One at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, Lancaster, 2 March 1996. Original vote: 3/4. Documentation included a sketch and mention that the bird was not wearing any bands, and the bird was in the company of Snow Geese. **July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class III** (Mark McConaughy). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.*

*Record 115-02-1996. One at Green Pond, Northampton, 20 March 1996. Original vote: 3/4. The bird was seen feeding in corn stubble with Canada Geese. Behavior of the bird was described, as was the lack of evidence of escape. **July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class III** (Dennis Miller). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.*

*Record 115-03-1996. One at Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery, 26 November 1996. Original vote: 3/4. The bird was an immature and was photographed standing with Canada Geese. No bands were evident. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-A.** With only a photo and no written description, the record was not acceptable by the criteria described.*

*Record 115-01-1997. One at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, Lancaster, 15 March 1997. Original vote: 1/5/1. A distantly-taken slide photo was the only documentation submitted describing the bird itself. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-A.** During re-evaluation, the committee agreed that the photo was not diagnostic.*

*Record 115-01-1998. One at Hereford, Berks, 14 February 1998. Original vote: 1/5/1. Photographed with Canada Geese, no leg bands were visible. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-A.** With only a photo and no written description, the record was not acceptable by the criteria described.*

*Record 115-01-1999. One at Codorus State Park, York, 20 January 1999. Original vote: 0/7. The written documentation was of a bird shot by a hunter and included a brief description of the bird. **July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-B.** The documentation was second-hand and was missing the circumstances of the original encounter in the field; for example, the bird’s behavior and reaction to humans (if observed).*

*Record 115-02-1999. One at Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery, 26 November 1999. Original vote: 0/7. The bird was feeding with Canada Geese. Good written details were provided. **July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class III** (Kevin Crilley, Butch Lishman). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.*

*Record 115-01-2000. One at Peace Valley Park, Bucks, 10 November 2007 to 17 January 2001. Original vote: 3/4. The bird was observed associating with Canada Geese over a period of several weeks and was documented by video and by written description. **July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class I-P** (August Mirabella, Devich*

Farbotnik (v), Jennifer Hanson, m.ob.). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described. This record becomes the first accepted Barnacle Goose for Pennsylvania that was documented by photograph or video.

Record 115-01-2002. One at Buckingham Township, Bucks, 8 to 19 February 2002. Original vote: 2/5. Photographed with Snow Goose; the bird showed no leg bands. July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class I-P (Fred Tetlow, August Mirabella, Alan Brady (p), Devich Farbotnik (v), Paul Lehman). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.

Record 115-01-2004. One at Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery, 7 March 2004. Original vote: 5/2. Photographed with Canada Geese, but no written details were provided. July 2008 decision: Not Accepted, Class IV-A. Without written details the record is not acceptable. The reevaluation in July 2008 was in effect the second round of voting on this record.

Record 115-01-2005. One at Churchville Reservoir, Bucks, 15 January 2005. Original vote: 2/4. Video of the bird was submitted. July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class I-P (Devich Farbotnik). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.

Record 115-02-2005. One at Peace Valley Park, Bucks, 28 February to 4 March 2005. Original vote: 1/4. Photographed on water with Canada Geese, written details were submitted. Legs were not seen. July 2008 decision: Accepted, Class I-P (Howard Eskin (p), August Mirabella). Details were sufficient for acceptance by the criteria described.

Records Not Reviewed Prior to July 2007

Two additional records have come up for committee vote as of this writing that had never been reviewed by a previous committee. These two, and their decisions, are:

Record 115-01-2006. One at Peace Valley Park, Bucks, 27 December 2006. A good written description was submitted detailing the identification. The absence of leg bands and the bird's wary behavior was also noted (Steve Kacir). Accepted, Class III, 6/0.

Record 115-01-2008. One at Walker Lake, Snyder, 14 March 2008. The written description mentioned only a bird in flight and did not adequately eliminate other species. Not Accepted, Class IV-B, 1/5.

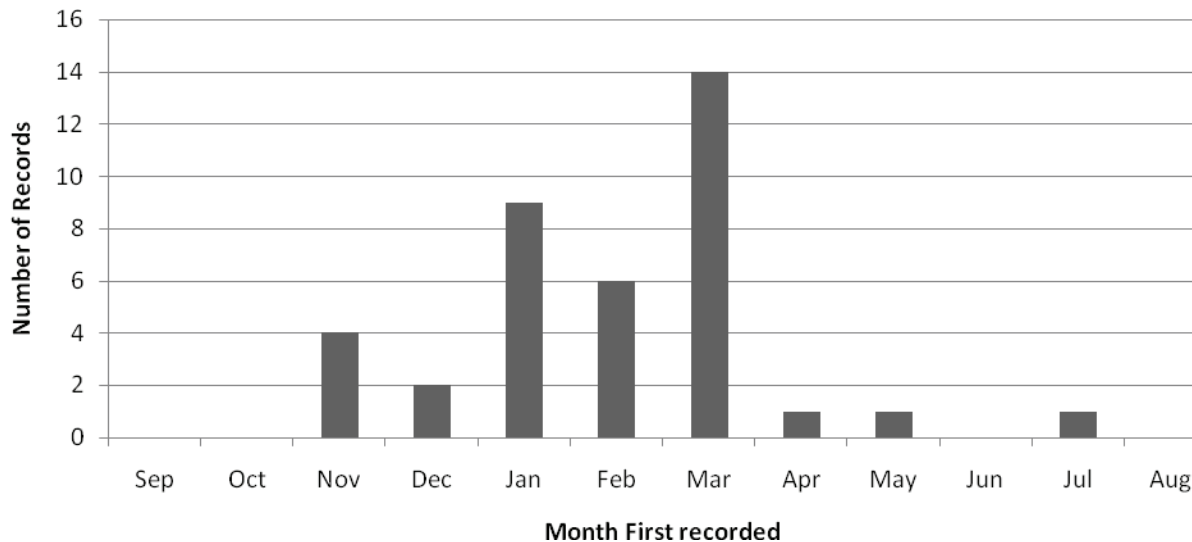
Additional Reports

Following is a summary of 26 other reports of Barnacle Goose in

Pennsylvania that were never submitted for committee consideration. Since undocumented reports fall outside the scope of this article, details of the sightings are not supplied except for some very brief notes where appropriate. These sightings provide some additional context for the status, distribution, and frequency of the species in Pennsylvania. Many thanks to Paul Hess for compiling this list from reports made in *North American Birds* through 2006. Hess notes also that the distribution of records by month in Pennsylvania closely mirrors the overall North American pattern as reported over the years in *North American Birds* and elsewhere (unpub. data).

- 2 March 1978 – Struble Lake, Chester.*
- 2-3 March 1982 – Lake Muhlenberg, Lehigh.*
- 13-14 March 1982 – Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, Lancaster.*
- 24 April 1982 – Washington Reservoir, Washington. Considered an escape due to date and location; also the bird appeared coincident with a few other obvious escaped/released birds in sw. Pennsylvania in the same time frame.*
- 12 March 1986 – Washington Boro, Lancaster. Seen among 10,000 Tundra Swans.*
- 15-16 February 1990 – near Honey Brook, Chester.*
- 3 March 1990 – Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, Lancaster. On the same day, 5 flavirostris*

Figure 1: Thirty-eight reports of Barnacle Goose in Pennsylvania 1978-2006, gathered from *North American Birds* (and its predecessors) and *Pennsylvania Birds* (courtesy Paul Hess)



Greater White-fronted Geese were at the same location.

- March 1996 – Hibernia Lake, Chester. Three birds.
- 10 March 1996 – Conejohela Flats, Lancaster.
- 14 January 1997 – Marsh Creek State Park, Chester.
- 1 March 1997 – Struble Lake, Chester.
- 10-11 January 1998 – Peace Valley Park and several local ponds, Bucks. Five birds.
- 15 February 1998 – Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery. Four birds.
- 21 January 1999 – Green Lane Reservoir, Montgomery.
- 31 January to 6 March 1999 – Peace Valley Park, Bucks.
- 2 March 1999 – Oreland, Montgomery.
- 8-28 May 1999 – Gotwals Pond in Oley, Berks. Considered an escape due to date.
- 3-9 December 1999 – Peace Valley Park, Bucks.
- 29 February 2000 – Struble Lake, Chester. Present with a Brant; Snow Geese were also stopping there regularly at the time.
- 8-19 February 2002 – Buckingham Township, Bucks.
- 21 November 2003 – Coatesville Reservoir, Chester.
- 7 January 2005 – Octorara Lake, Lancaster.
- 9 January 2005 – Coatesville Reservoir, Chester.
- 12 March 2005 – Lake Nockamixon, Bucks. This bird was possibly the same as that which was described in PORC records 115-01-2005 and 115-02-2005.
- 31 May 2005 – New Hope, Bucks. Had a magenta aviary band.
- 17 December 2006 to 1 January 2007 – Montour Preserve, Montour.

Current Status

As a result of the action taken during the July 2008 meeting, Barnacle Goose was added to the Official List of the Birds of Pennsylvania. There are now nine accepted records of this species. PORC has reviewed eight additional records which were not accepted.

The majority of Barnacle Goose records are from the Piedmont region, where this species is recorded almost annually with flocks of migrant Canada Geese and occasionally also with Snow Geese. Rarely, they are recorded in the presence of Greater White-fronted Geese. Vagrants are not expected from April to October, and any Barnacle

Goose recorded during these months should be met with skepticism. Similarly, Barnacle Geese recorded outside the Piedmont should be very carefully examined and extensively documented, if possible. Though any record from outside the Piedmont is not automatically unacceptable, it would be outside the expected geographic range, increasing the likelihood of an escape.

Barnacle Goose remains a PORC review species. The committee reminds observers that like any out-of-range waterfowl species, a single photograph of a Barnacle Goose without written support will very likely be met with a Not Accepted vote. The committee requests that all photos and complete written documentation be forwarded to the PORC Secretary, Nick Pulcinella, 613 Howard Road, West Chester, PA 19380, (610) 696-0687, nickpulcinella@verizon.net.

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