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'We knew it was rare ...'

BY LES WINKELER, THE SOUTHERN Apr 1, 2011



Les Winkeler / The Southern John Hinde of Whitetails and Waterfowl puts the finishing touches on a barnacle goose mount

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Harold and Harlan Swearengin truly got a rare bird during a Dec. 13 goose hunt at their Union County Club.

They downed a barnacle goose. Although not rare in its native range, it is extremely rare in Illinois

"There was a sighting of a barnacle goose in central Illinois last year," said Ray Marshalla, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources waterfowl biologist. "In my career, this is probably the second I've heard being sighted in Illinois."

Marshalla has been with the IDNR since 1978.

According to the National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America part of the world population breeds in northeastern Greenland. It is considered an accidental vagrant in the Maritime Provinces of Canada.

The National Geographic publication said the barnacle goose is common in captivity in some areas. It speculates that birds sighted in the northeastern North America could be escapees.

"Somebody might have had it in captivity," Marshalla said. "People will raise anything. They'll either escape or let them go on purpose. Unless you have evident of it, there is no way to prove it."

There are other possibilities as to how the bird made its way to Union County, but it is all speculation.

"You get weird things like that occasionally," Marshalla said. "They call them vagrants. They could have gotten blown away in a storm. If they're migrating, you'll see a snow goose with a flock of Canada geese. They got separated from the snow geese and just went with them.

"Those are possible explanations. You can't prove it."

In this case, the barnacle goose wasn't flying with any other birds.

"It was by itself, but there were some specks (white-fronted geese) in the background," Harlan Swearingin said.

Although three hunters fired at the same time, Harold Swearingin was given credit for the kill.

"I broke out my barnacle goose call and let him shoot it," Harlan joked. "I looked up and saw it. I really didn't make out what it was."

At the time, they didn't know exactly what they had bagged.

"We shot it behind the pit," Harlan Swearingin said. "When the dog brought it around I thought 'what the heck have we got here.' We thought it was a cross at first. My brother guessed it was a barnacle."

The bird was taken to White Tails and Waterfowl to be mounted.

"It's got to be pushing 30 years in this business, and it's the first one I've ever seen," said John Hinde, owner of White Tails and Waterfowl. "The guy told me (it was a barnacle goose) over the phone before he brought it in here. He had done some research."

The Swearingins had consulted Frank Bellrose's Ducks, Geese & Swans of North America.

Hinde said when he saw a picture of the barnacle goose, there was no question about the bird's identification.

"The black chest and the white that goes all the way around the head ...," Hinde said.

It is a trophy of a lifetime.

"We knew it was rare," Harlan Swearingin said. "But, we didn't know how rare."

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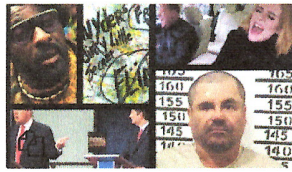
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