

# Our Diminishing Heritage

The Cape Barren Goose (*Cereopsis novaehollandiae*) is found only in Australia, and is one of the rarer species of waterfowl. Not only is it rare, but it is a very handsome bird of apparently ancient origin possessing no close relatives. Taxonomists are confused by its relationships with other waterfowl for some consider it to be linked with the true geese of the Northern Hemisphere, others with the Sheld geese, while others would place it in a tribe of its own.

The goose was so named by the survivors of a ship wrecked south of Cape Barren Island in the Bass Strait in 1797. The survivors used the bird as a source of food and it has been persecuted ever since, becoming the subject of considerable controversy. Its habitat has been heavily grazed by sheep with resultant conflict with graziers, and it was the subject of uncontrolled exploitation by shooters for many years. That the species has survived at all suggests that it is very resilient.

Most of the conflict and controversy has centred around the breeding grounds in Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria. In Western Australia the Cape Barren Goose was given full protection in 1938, and in June this year was given additional protection when the fine for taking one of these birds illegally was increased to \$1,000. The breeding grounds of the Recherche Archipelago are an "A" Class Fauna and Flora Reserve vested in the Western Australian Wildlife Authority.

The Cape Barren Goose is a distinctive ash-grey colour with black wing-tips and tail and a striking yellow-green cere on the bill. Few measurements are available, but H. J. Frith recorded the data on the opposite page from a sample of fourteen birds taken in 1965.

The geese breed on islands and their distribution ranges along the southern coast of Australia, from the Furneaux Group off the north-east coast of Tasmania to the Recherche Archipelago off Western Australia. They are grazing birds and are usually found on beaches, rocky prominences and grassed areas or, when breeding, in low scrub.

It is thought that Cape Barren Geese mate for life as they are found in pairs throughout the year. Breeding usually occurs in June, but when the summer and autumn are dry, nest building is delayed and restricted. The male assists with the building of the nest which is a heap of whatever material is on hand and is lined with grey down. The number of eggs laid varies between one and seven, but four is the average. Nests are rarely found close together because the Cape Barren Goose is a very territorial bird and the male will fiercely defend the nesting area.

Indications are that Cape Barren Geese do not migrate to any great extent, a factor which highlights the need for all breeding grounds in Australia to be fully protected and for that protection to be strictly enforced. A population estimate in 1968 suggested that only about 6,000 birds remained in the world, but with careful management over a number of years, populations can recover; perhaps one day the goose can be returned to the list of game species. The tragedy is that the status of the bird should have become so precarious in the first instance.

[Footnote—Recent reports from observers in Esperance state that Cape Barren Geese have been sighted on the mainland. This could indicate that numbers on the Archipelago are increasing].



Cape Barren Geese at Kangaroo Island, S.A.

(Photograph by Ederic Slater; courtesy of H. J. Frith.)

# CAPE BARREN GOOSE

*Cereopsis novaehollandiae*



(Photograph by Ederic Slater; courtesy of H. J. Frith.)



Distribution of the Cape Barren Goose. The black spots show islands where breeding is known to occur. In summer scattered groups might be found on the mainland and in north-east Tasmania, adjacent to these breeding areas.

## DISTRIBUTION:

Islands off southern coast of Australia from Furneaux Group (N.E. Tasmania) to Recherche Archipelago (W.A.).

May be found on coastal swamps in summer.

## HABITAT:

Low-lying islands with grass, *Poa* tussocks and scrub.

Breeding habitat is varied.

## LOOKS:

Adult Male and Female—  
General colour—ash grey, head is paler;  
Crown—white;  
Tail—black;  
Iris—hazel brown;  
Feet—black;  
Bill—black;  
Cere—greenish yellow.

## SIZE:

Length—750-910 mm.

Wingspread—1370-1620 mm.

Wing—450-490 mm.

Females are slightly smaller.

From sample of 14 adult males collected in 1965.

## WEIGHT:

Adult Male—3700-5100 g. (from 1965 sample).

## NESTING:

Possibly mate for life. Nest-building may begin in May: clutches are begun between May and August. Main hatching occurs in late July and mid August. Male assists with nest-building and defends the territory while female is brooding.

Nests are usually widely separated, set on western sides of islands exposed to prevailing winds.

Eggs—elliptical, white with layer of lime over shell. An average of 4 are laid.