



A Brief History of the **Swan Goose** (*Anser cygnoides*) under Domestication in the West

By Jonathan M.
Thompson

PART I

'Let us grasp the situation; solve the complicated plot; quiet, calm deliberation disentangles every knot.'

W.S. Gilbert.

The Rev. E.S. Dixon was well aware of the tangle of information regarding domesticated Asiatic Geese when he wrote in 1848: "Confusion, therefore, and perplexity are the certain lot of whosoever attempts to trace this bird in our books of natural history."⁵ How true; and ensuing writers on poultry helped to confuse the situation even further.

However, to start at the very beginning, it has been recently been established that the wild **Swan Goose (*Anser cygnoides*)** existed some 360,000 years ago.¹⁸ Time enough has elapsed for distinct, fixed types to become established and, in China today, there are now some twenty-six distinct domesticated 'forms' of the **Swan Goose**.

The earliest European account (the writer has found) is by Friar Odoric of Pordenone when, on returning to Europe from his travels through Asia (1316 to 1330), he recounts his experiences in a journal written in Latin.²⁰ Although Odoric gives them no specific name, he describes seeing in the city of *Censcalan* (Canton, modern Guangzhou, China) large white geese having both a knob above the beak and a large dewlap on the throat. An early translator of the text interjects "[He meaneth Pellicans, which the Spaniards cal Alcatrarzi.]", suggesting that, at that time, such birds as Odoric describes were unknown to Western culture. Since time immemorial, Indian and Arab traders have plied the South China Sea trading with the ports of Canton, Zaiton (Zaitun or Zayton, = Ts'iuen-chau or Chincheu, the present-day Quanzhou), Xiamen (modern Amoy) and Foochow (or Fu-chau). European sea-trading with China was underway by 1516; the Qing Dynastic Government at first allowed trade only through the port of Canton - where Odoric saw the white geese. The port of Amoy, a little further to the East, was opened to Europeans in 1541; Britain establishing practically a monopoly over the trade. America was allowed to join the trade in 1783 (after it became independent from Britain), the appropriately named *Empress of China* reaching China in 1784.

In England, in 1676, Francis Willughby describes a bird that is recognisable as the **Chinese Goose**;¹⁹ and John Ray's translation of 1678 states: "**The SWAN GOOSE, *Anser Guineus*** : notable for her lifted neck, girdled breast, crested head, and knobbed forehead. This was brought over from abroad, but is now grown common enough among us; as the *Turkey* and *Peacock* also were, which we reckon among our Domesticks." In the main text of the work "**The Swan Goose**" is retained, but the specific name is given as: "***Anser cygnoides Hispanicus seu Guineensis***." = "Swan-like Goose of Spain or Guinea [Africa]." (Trans. JMT.). No-where in the description is there mention of a dewlap on the throat.¹⁶ These authors had some images re-engraved more to their taste and true likeness, and the image (Tab. LXXI.) titled "***Anser cygnoides, The Swan-goose***" is in fact a **Canada Goose (*Anser Canadensis*. Will.)**, and is explained as such in the preface by John Ray.

Ray (1713), gives precedent to: - "***ANSER Cygneus Guineensis, nonnullis Anser Hispanicus. The SWAN-GOOSE.***" = 'Swan Goose of Guinea, known to some as Spanish Goose. . .'.¹⁷ (Trans. JMT.).

It is uncertain which species the Comte Marsili describes in 1726, for although he gives "***Anser Hispanicus seu Cygnoides***" and the text follows Willughby, the accompanying figure resembles a form of Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna*).¹⁴



In works published in England in 1731 and 1734, Eleazar Albin describes two distinct forms of 'knobbed' geese.¹ That the ***Anser cygnoides*** of both Willughby and Albin are one and the same species is certain. The descriptions, sixty years apart, are almost identical and Albin provides hand-coloured illustrations to endorse his text. Albin describes a bird under the title: "**The Spanish Goose, or Swan Goose. *Anser cygnoides***" and illustrates a bird resembling the modern Chinese Goose, captioned "***Anser Hispanus Oye Espagnol The Spanish Goose***" (Fig.1).

Fig. 1.

His description and illustrations for his "**Moscovian Gander and Goose**" (Figs. 1A & 1B) appear to modern eyes as large cross-bred birds of possible African-type descent, complete with knob and dewlap – in the gander at least. Albin does not give, nor presumes to coin a Latin classification for this bird; possibly because it was something new to Western culture and unknown to the academics of the day, for he tells us: - "These fine birds I had of a *Moscovian* Merchant, who sent for them to that Country with a Design to propagate them here, which he did and sold them at a great price."



Figs.1A & 1B. Albin's 'Moscovian Gander and Goose.' Photo-copy courtesy of Joseph Locke.

In 1746 Linnæus (Carl von Linné) cites Ray and Willughby, and describes a single species as "**ANAS rostro semicylindrico, basi gibbo**", giving the common names in Sweden as '**Turkish Goose**' and '**Siberian Goose**'; stating its plumage colour varies and that it is 'a large, loud and raucous domesticated goose, brought in from abroad.'¹² (trans. JMT).

Jacob Klein, of Lubec, writes of two forms in 1750.⁹ For his "**ANSER HISPANICVS, an potius Guineensis**" he gives the common name of '**Spanish Goose**' and cites the '**Swan-Goose**' of Willughby and Albin, naming Marsili as another source. Klein then coins a name new to the series – "**ANSER RVSSICVS**," giving it the common names of '**Russian**' and '**Siberian Goose**', citing Albin's '**Moscovian**' geese, and adding he had seen " a variety of the Siberian goose, its throat larger, its bill and legs black, with a black depressed tubercle."

By 1756 Dr. Patrick Browne lists the "**China Goose**" as established in Jamaica and states it has a different voice from common geese.³ From the 1650's Sea trade between Jamaica and the western world, as well as the American mainland was prolific; therefore, it is probable, but not provable, these geese also made their way to the Americas around, or before, the 1750's.

Linnæus' work of 1758, which has been taken by most scholars to be the definitive classification of known species (Brisson's classification is now regarded by many to be the better format), gives two forms.¹³ The first is as given in 1746, with the added heading title of "**Cygnoid. 2. australis.**" The second type is given as – "**Cygnoid. orientalis. β. Anser, rostro semicylindrico atro basi gibbo, minor.**" – having a black (?) beak, smaller. Linnæus cites "**Anser Chinensis. It. Wgot. 145** of 1746, referring to this and Albin's **Moscovian Gander and Goose**, saying "*Varietas orientalis β, ab australi α, parum differ; imprimis quod illa minor.*" = 'There is little specific difference between the two varieties; especially the one (former?) is smaller.' (Trans. JMT).



Fig. 2

The names "**Die Chinesische Gans oder Trompeter, Anser Chinesiensis, Oye de Chine**" are given by Johann Frisch in his work published in parts, in Germany, between 1734 and 1763.⁷ The illustrations, Tab. 153(Fig. 2.) & Tab. 154, the first presenting a full page engraving of a bird which appears intermediate between the modern **African** and **Chinese**; the second is a head study with detail of the dentition of the beak. Frisch's illustrations are superior to other works of this period – excepting Albin – in presenting the birds in a more natural style and setting.

The Age of Enlightenment saw many scholars reaching for their quills in the race to document all known facts (and fictions) of Life. In France, Mathurin Brisson published descriptions of two types of knobbed geese in 1760.² The first he names "**L'Oye de Moscovie – Anser Moscoviticus**," and it is described from Albin's '**Moscovian**' geese, Klein's '**Russian**' geese and (surprisingly and, perhaps, perpetuating the confusion) Linnæus' second, smaller species, "**Cygnoid. orientalis. β. . . minor**", which is out of context beside the other descriptions cited; but the overall description relates to the larger, or 'African' type. The second description is derived from birds he saw in the collection of Louis XV (Madame de Pompadour assembled a vast collection of plants, animals and birds in the park at Versailles) and from earlier writers.¹⁵ He gives: – "**L'Oye de Guinée . . . Anser Guineensis**," stating it to be smaller than the preceding species and, therefore, it may be taken to describe the precursor of the modern **Chinese Goose**. Although the text indicates the only live specimen seen by Brisson was his 'Guinea Goose', he comments that Albin's illustrations of both species are badly coloured - "*avec des figures mal coloriées*,"; where-as to modern eyes, as stated above, Albin's "**Spanish, or Swan Goose**" is representative of what is now known by the name '**Chinese Goose**'. Therefore, it is questionable as precisely which type and colour of birds Brisson saw at Versailles, and how he could legitimately comment on Albin's illustrations without sight of the living, or dead, '**Moscovian**' type.

In 1739 Georges Louis Leclercq, Le Comte de Buffon, was appointed *Intendant du Jardin des Plantes du Roi* (Head of the Royal Botanic Gardens) to Louis XV, some forty years prior to the publication of his volumes on the natural history of birds as part of his great collective work (One can but suggest a possible rivalry between Brisson and Buffon. Mme de Pompadour bequeathed her pet dog, parrot and monkey to Buffon).¹⁵ He was aided by all the specialists of his time; the greater part of the *Histoire naturelle des Oiseaux* was compiled by Philibert de Montbeillard & the Abbé Bexon.¹¹ Whoever is responsible for the volumes on waterfowl, having *swept everything into their net*, amalgamates all earlier writers' descriptions of the two forms of **Swan Goose** into a single species – **L'Oie de Guinée**, stating that both Linnæus and Brisson were mistaken in giving two descriptions for what are, according to this author, one and the same creature.

The statement becomes even more curious on viewing the illustrations of Buffon's '**Guinea Goose**,' given as they are, in two forms. Buffon engaged Françoise Martinet (artist and engraver) to produce the lavish folio containing 1,008 hand-coloured plates, of which 973 are birds, known as the *Planches Enlumineés*.⁴ This was published in cahiers (parts or folders), appearing in 1765

to 1783/6 (authorities differ on the dates), and does not follow the classification or format of the text.



Fig. 3.

The hand-coloured representation of *L'Oie de Guinée* (Fig. 3.) is poor (in the writer's opinion it is cartoon-ish) when compared with the other subjects, but it is recognisable as a form of the **Swan Goose**; slight in frame and sporting a large wattle or dewlap under its black beak. The volume of text describing the bird was published in 1783 and is interspersed with heavier, un-coloured engravings, after the artist Jacques de Sere (Fig.4). The de Sere illustration presents a more life-like image of a large, bulky bird after the form of the modern **African Goose**.¹¹ Buffon and/or his collaborators refused to

acknowledge the marked differences between the two forms, believing them to be due more to the sex and/or age.

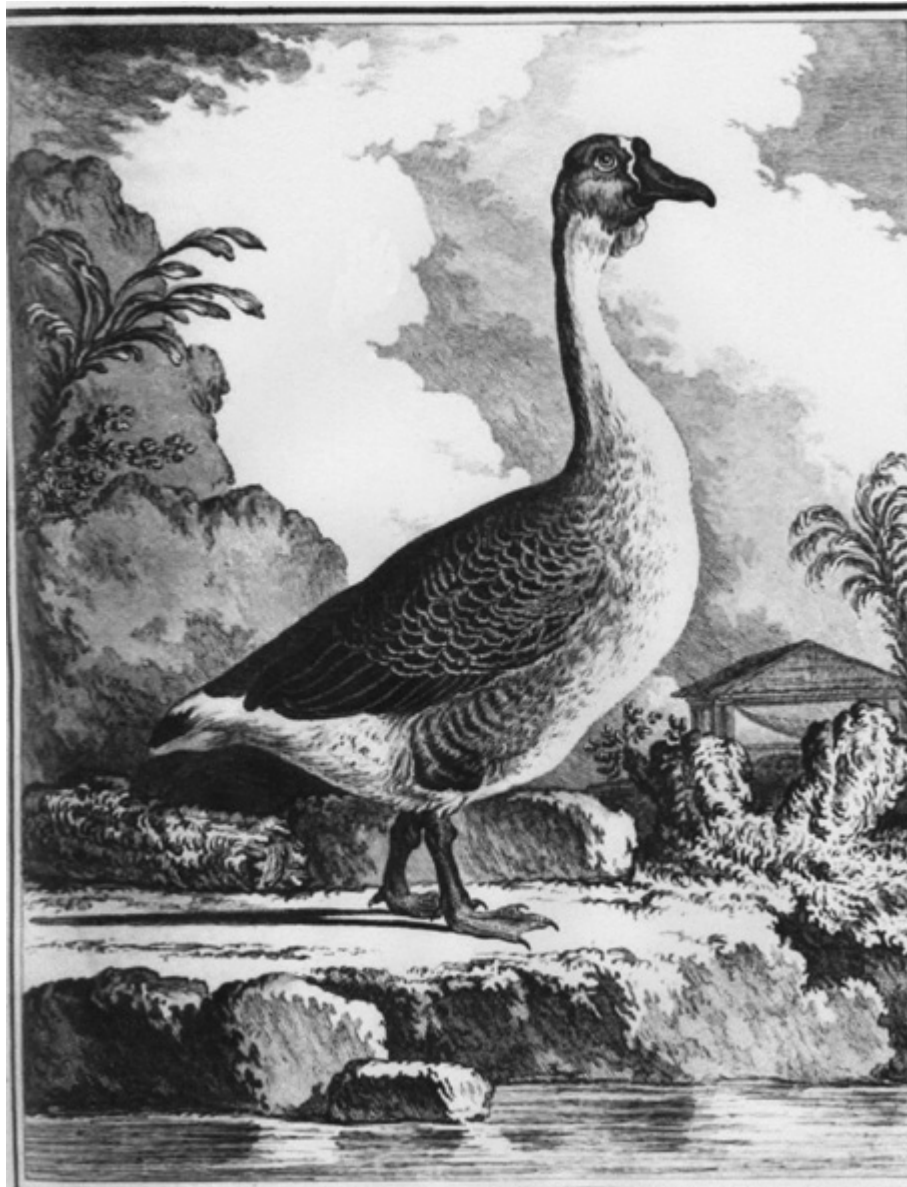


Fig. 4.

Captain Cook's assistant surgeon, William Ellis, notes in his narrative of 1782, that while at Hawaii " , the natives brought off several geese, which were quite tame; they are not unlike the Chinese geese; they called them Na-Na. " ⁶ Ellis likens his "**Chinese geese**" to the **Hawaiian Goose** or **Né Né (Branta Sandvicensis)**. Precisely where Ellis had observed his **Chinese Geese** to be able to make his association is not known; he was, most probably, aware of the smaller, lighter breed as being common in Britain in his time.

John Latham, in 1785, basically repeats Willughby from over one hundred years before; attributing his description to Brisson, he adds his own observations to his text, initially presenting two separate forms, but finally suggesting the differing descriptions are of the same, but variable subject, stating :-

Such are the descriptions of *Brisson*, supposing the above birds to be distinct; but later observations inform us, they all belong to one species, the characteristic marks of which are the knob over the bill, and the loose skin under the chin. We are inclined also to think, that the bird often varies, with the bill, knob, and legs, black; as the major part which have come under our inspection have been of that colour. ¹⁰

In American, President George Washington gives the first mention of "**Chinese Geese**" on the American mainland in a letter when, in 1788, (America could openly trade with China from 1783) Gouveneur Morris sent him two Chinese pigs and with them "a pair of Chinese geese, which are really the foolishest geese I ever beheld: for they choose all times for setting but in the spring, and one of them is even now [November] actually engaged in that business."⁸

It has been shown that two forms of the **Swan Goose** became known in Europe from around 1734, and a form was common-place in England before 1676; the beak and feet of the birds being variously orange, red or black in colour; an occurrence found in the birds to the present day.

For the Americans, at least, their goose had landed; and it bore the title of '**Chinese Goose**', a name retained for the lighter, slighter form of the domesticated Swan Goose. Such are the confusions in 19th century poultry literature, in Europe there was to be a further hundred years of confused evidence before the two forms are accepted, and yet another eighty years before both forms appear in the British Standards.

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PART 2 and PART 3
Coming soon

