

Variation of bill colouration in Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons albifrons*)

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Bill colouration is an important fieldmark for separating the two races of Greater White-fronted Goose occurring in Europe – *albifrons* and *flavirostris*. The variation of this feature is not widely covered in literature especially in the most commonly used field guides [4,7,8], despite the identification of different Greater White-fronted Goose taxa being explained by several authors in detail [2,3,5,6]. When dealing with birds which occur outside their normal range (e.g. *A. a. flavirostris* in the Baltic region), other fieldmarks (tail pattern, upperpart tones, bill shape etc.) have to be applied in the identification process to exclude individuals with abnormal bill colour. I hereby present two cases of *A. a. albifrons* with orange bills. The identification and taxonomy of different Greater White-fronted Goose taxa is not within the scope of this note. We don't include other orange-billed taxons in this discussion either.

So far only one Greenland White-fronted Goose (*A. a. flavirostris*) has been recorded in Estonia, 2 in Finland and about 60 individuals in Sweden. Although the identification of extralimital *flavirostris* is challenging and the race is probably overlooked in the Baltic region, it surely is a rare vagrant here. Estonia is an important stop-over area for geese and I have personally studied more than 100 000 individuals of *albifrons*. I haven't seen any bird which has all the characters of *flavirostris*. But couple of birds have caused some alarm because of „wrong” bill colour. I presume such *albifrons* are not common considering the time I have spent on scanning flocks of this race.

Just for reference I present some typical bill profiles of the *albifrons* race from Estonia (all from spring). These are all pink and short as you would expect from this taxon:



Case 1: 12.04.2015 Rahinge

This individual had a somewhat longish bill but not quite ideal for *flavirostris*. Also, the neck was a bit longer than on surrounding birds. Compare the bill colour with *albifrons*. Bare part colouration in birds can be affected by diet and overall condition so this could be the cause of this type of variation. Hybridization could be one explanation for such birds, but other field marks don't support this wild guess (neck and upperpart without darkish cast). Also, it's worth noting, that *flavirostris* with pink and shortish bills do occur.



Case 2: 2.04.2015 Mõra

Probably a second-year bird with just a small white rim at the base of the bill. This bird looked darkish and large compared to the *albifrons* nearby. Still, the shape of the bill doesn't fit for ideal *flavirostris* at all (although shorter billed individuals do occur in *flavirostris*). The base of the bill is confusingly wide.



Here's an example of a classical *flavirostris* for reference. Note longish orange bill (hard to estimate the colour in that light though), dark head and neck, darkish upperparts and just a small white tip on tail feathers. Ireland, Co Wexford, autumn 2012, by Hannu Huhtinen.



References:

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