



# THE LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE





## Our smallest goose



The Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* is, as its name indicates, one of our smallest geese. The wingspan is 115-135 cm and its weight varies between 1500 and 2200 grams. In comparison, the Greylag Goose *Anser anser* has a wingspan of 150-170 cm and a weight of 3400-4200 grams.

Adult Lesser White-fronted Geese have a characteristic white forehead and a yellow eye ring, and have dark streaks under the belly. The number and extent of these streaks varies from one bird to another, which makes the identification of individual birds possible.

The call of the Lesser White-fronted Goose is very different and more musical compared to that of the calls of the Greylag and Bean Goose *Anser fabalis*, which are common breeding birds in Finnmark.

In appearance, the Lesser White-fronted Goose can be confused with the Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*. The latter, however, does not nest in Fennoscandia (Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Kola Peninsula, and Karelia in Russia), but may be observed in small numbers on migration in spring and autumn, and also in winter in southern Norway.

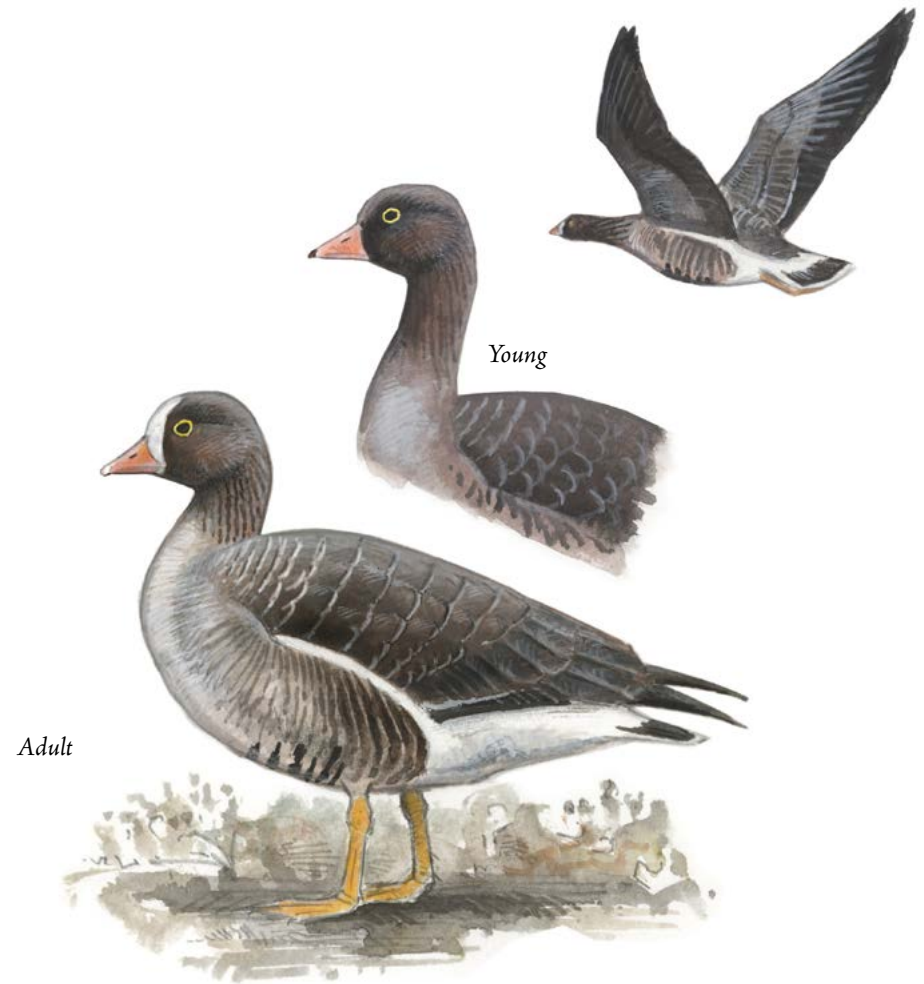


Illustration: Trond Haugskott



## A dramatic decline

The historical breeding distribution of the LWFG stretched from Fennoscandia in the west as far east as eastern Siberia. Since the 1930s and 1940s the population has become greatly reduced. Today the world population (including juveniles) in autumn has been estimated to be 20,000 – 25,000 birds.

In Norway, written sources describe the Lesser White-fronted Goose as being a common breeding species in the 1920s, from Nord-Trøndelag north to Finnmark. There is corresponding information from Sweden and Finland that tells of large numbers of Lesser White-fronted Geese up to the 1930s. The population in Fennoscandia was estimated at a minimum of 10,000 birds, prior to the decline that began in the 1940s. In 2015 the population in Fennoscandia was reckoned to comprise about 90-100 individuals.

The cause of the great decline of the Lesser White-fronted Goose in its breeding area appears to be complex. Hunting at its staging and wintering areas has been brought forward as the factor with the greatest negative effect on the population in Russia and Fennoscandia. Other negative factors that have been suggested are human disturbance, predation, and loss and destruction of habitat.



Lesser White-fronted Goose killed in Kazakhstan.

As a result of these pressures, the Lesser White-fronted Goose has become threatened with global extinction, and it is now placed on the Norwegian Red List as critically endangered. The Lesser White-fronted Goose gained protection in 1970, and is now listed as a priority species in accordance with the Nature Diversity Directive.

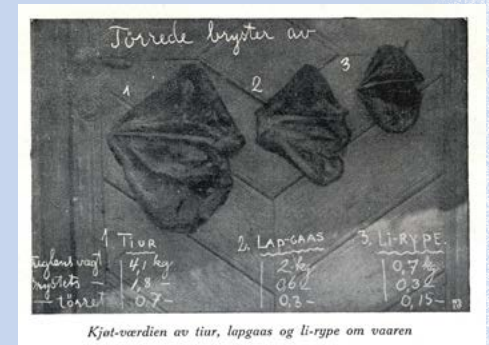
## Hunting and capture of geese in Finnmark

Capture of geese during the moulting period, when they are flightless, seems to have been widespread in the mountainous areas of Finnmark up until the 1930s / 1940s. The moult period of both the Lesser White-fronted Goose and Bean Goose occurs in summer some weeks after the eggs hatch. At this time the birds are flightless and therefore very vulnerable to disturbance and predation. A common method in connection with capture of moulting geese was to use a boat to scare the swimming birds towards land. On land, the remaining members of the capture team were hidden, and killed the geese with clubs or by strangling. Dogs were also used during moult capture. The newly fledged young were sometimes transported alive down to settlements, and fed until they were ready for killing in the autumn.

Trapping, as well as shooting from a hide with a rifle at the resting sites of the geese in spring, are other known hunting methods, for example from Valdakmyra in Porsanger.



Illustration of Moulting capture of geese in Taimyr (from Storå, N.; Mass capture of waterfowl in northern Eurasia, 1968).



Bird-meat prices from the 1920s. From left to right; Capercaillie, Lesser White-fronted Goose and Willow Grouse (from Evjenth, H.; Finnmarks jakter, 1927)

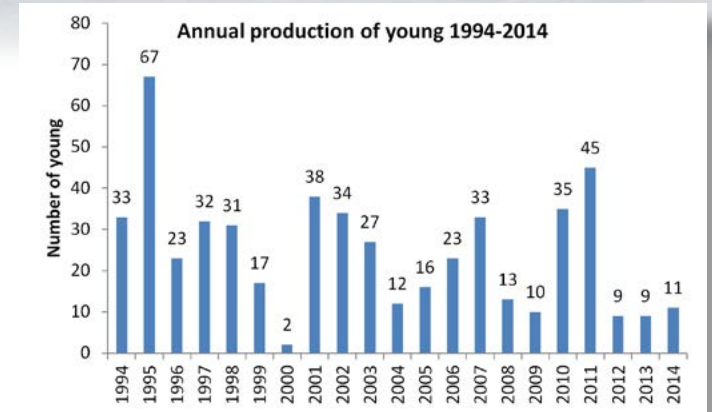


# Mapping in Norway

Norsk Ornitologisk Forening (BirdLife Norway (NOF)) ([www.birdlife.no](http://www.birdlife.no)) started the Lesser White-fronted Goose Project in 1987. This work was the start of a thorough investigation of the distribution into the Lesser White-fronted Goose in Norway and Fennoscandia. Since 1990, systematic surveillance has been carried out at Norway's most important staging site during spring and autumn migration: Valdakmyra, a part of Stabbursnes Nature Reserve.

The Lesser White-fronted Geese that arrive at Valdakmyra in spring are estimated to comprise 80 % of the entire Fennoscandian population. Since NOF began its monitoring at Valdakmyra, the annual estimated number of the Lesser White-fronted Geese has never exceeded 90 birds. In 2015 the Fennoscandian population was estimated to consist of 20-25 adult pairs. In the period 1996-2014 the production of young in Norway has been an average of 22 young per year.

In addition, comprehensive work has been carried out with regard to mapping of the migration routes used by the Fennoscandian population. Moreover, NOF is a central partner attached to the international work that is now established in an attempt to preserve the Lesser White-fronted Goose, now threatened with extinction.



The figure shows annual production of young recorded at Stabbursnes Nature Reserve in the period 1994-2014.





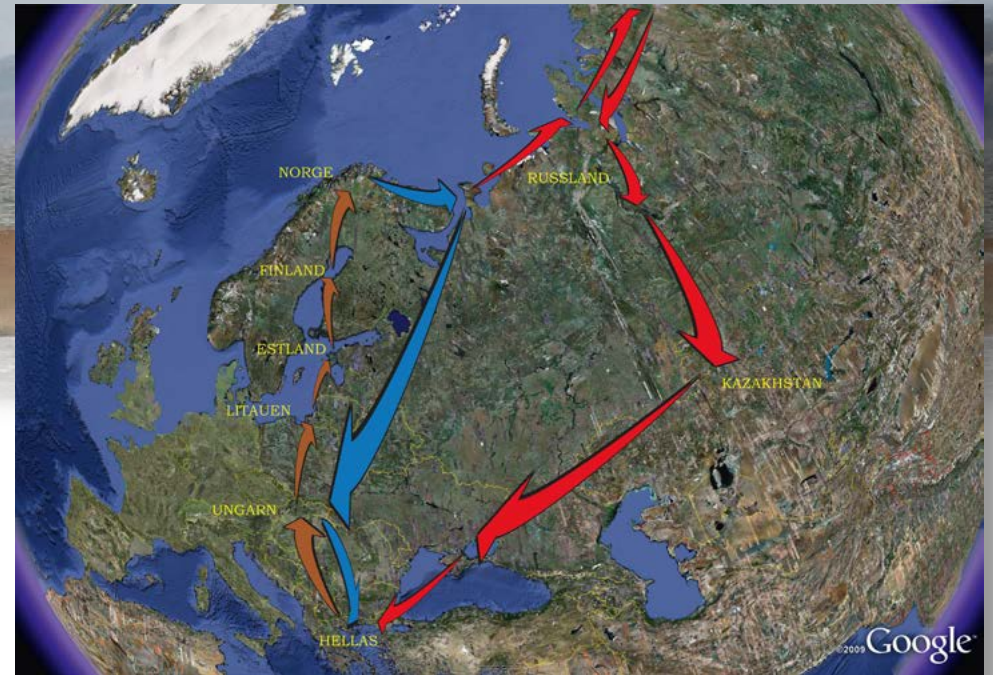
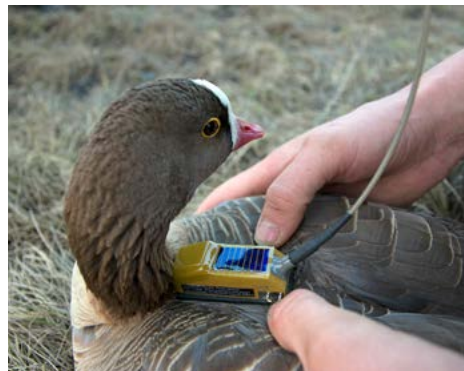


## Migration routes and annual cycle of the Fennoscandian population

The spring migration of the Lesser White-fronted Goose northwards through Finland has been well documented historically. The autumn migration and wintering grounds of the Norwegian population have, however, been unknown until until relatively recently. In an attempt to map this, BirdLife Norway has, since 1995, succeeded in catching 51 Lesser White-fronted Geese at Valdakmyra. All these geese have been ringed with colour codes, and 11 birds have also been equipped with satellite-senders. This project has provided new knowledge, such as on annual cycle of the Lesser White-fronted Goose.

The Lesser White-fronted Geese arrive at Valdakmyra in Porsanger in the first half of May. Here they forage on the nutrient-rich creeping alkali grass for a week, before moving in late May/early June to their

breeding grounds located in the northern part of Finnmarksvidda. The breeding biotope consists of extensive wetland areas where the nest itself is often situated in birch or willow scrub. After arrival at the nest site, the age and breeding success of the Lesser White-fronted Goose will play a decisive role relating to the ensuing course of migration:



The figure shows the migration routes of the Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Geese. The red and blue colours show autumn migration. Brown colour shows spring migration.

**Red migration route:** Young, immature geese (1-2 years old) begin, at the end of June, migration eastwards together with adult Lesser White-fronted Geese that have bred unsuccessfully. This migration can go so far east as the Taimyr Peninsula in northern Russia. In autumn the migration continues from the Taimyr Peninsula further to staging sites in Kazakhstan. Here the Fennoscandian and Russian populations separate, the Fennoscandian population migrating to Greece where it has its wintering grounds.

**Blue migration route:** Lesser White-fronted Geese that have bred successfully, moult near the breeding area and come down to Inner Porsangerfjord in mid-August. After resting for about 3 weeks, the birds move further to the Kanin Peninsula at the mouth of the White Sea in northern Russia. From here the migration goes south to Hungary where the birds can remain for several weeks before moving on to the wintering grounds in Greece.

**Brown migration route:** Spring migration starts from Greece at the turn of the months January/February. On the way north, permanent staging sites, mainly in Hungary, Estonia and Finland are visited, before the Lesser White-fronted Geese again land at Valdakmyra.





# Measures to halt the population decline

Both national and international plans of action have been drawn up for the Lesser White-fronted Goose. Common to these plans is that they prepare measures that, in time, should lead to a growth in the global population. The character of these measures varies with respect to the different challenges that each single nation has.

In Norway the following measures have been implemented to preserve the Lesser White-fronted Goose population:

- Access restrictions to Valdakmyra in the resting periods: From 1st May to 30th June and from 10th August to 20th September.
- Ban on the hunting in Finnmark of Bean Goose and Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*, to avoid shooting of Lesser White-fronted Geese in error. For the same reason hunting of the Greylag Goose is only permitted in the coastal areas and outer parts of the fjords in Finnmark. The Bean Goose population is also classified as threatened (Norwegian Biodiversity Information Centre 2015).
- Since 2007, the Norwegian Nature Inspectorate has annually removed red foxes from the core nesting area of the Lesser White-fronted Goose in order to reduce predation on eggs and young.
- Annual surveillance of the population and mapping of the migration routes of the Fennoscandian population, its resting sites etc. – under the auspices of BirdLife Norway.
- Information work. A series of measures have been undertaken. On the Internet the following pages are recommended:

NOF's home page: [www.birdlife.no/prosjekter/dverggaas.php](http://www.birdlife.no/prosjekter/dverggaas.php)

International pages: [www.piskulka.net/](http://www.piskulka.net/)

Exhibition «Siste trekk»: [stabburnes.dbit.no/siste\\_trekk/index.php](http://stabburnes.dbit.no/siste_trekk/index.php)

Eu-Life project: [wwf.fi/en/lwfg/](http://wwf.fi/en/lwfg/)

## Release of Lesser White-fronted Geese in Fennoscandia

In Norway, Sweden and Finland attempts have been made to release Lesser White-fronted Geese in order to strengthen the population in Fennoscandia. The birds used in the Swedish and Finnish release programmes, were the offspring of various domesticated Lesser White-fronted Geese from the continent. In Sweden one also hoped to establish a new westerly migration route with the aid of tame Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis* as foster parents. DNA studies performed on these farm-reared populations in Finland and Sweden have shown hybridising with White-fronted Geese and with the Barnacle Goose that were used as foster parents. At the same time, blood tests taken from over 100 wild Lesser White-fronted Geese have not shown hybridising with any other species of goose.

In Norway and Finland release attempts have now been stopped. In Sweden the release programme was stopped for a time, but continues today using the offspring of Russian Lesser White-fronted Geese. Based upon current knowledge, presented in the international and Norwegian action plans for the Lesser White-fronted Goose, the Swedish release project is judged to be a threat to the remaining Fennoscandian population of the species. Potential threats concern changes in migration routes, habitat preferences, genetic contamination, spread of disease and other unforeseeable negative ecological effects.





## Recreation and outdoor access with the Lesser White-fronted Goose as neighbour

**A** positive development regarding the population of the Lesser White-fronted Goose, is the successful international cooperation that has been started. According to our present day knowledge, it is highly probable that, if the Norwegian breeding birds disappear, then the Fennoscandian population will also disappear. It is therefore extremely important that users of Finnmark's nature have a basic knowledge of the biology of the Lesser White-fronted Goose and of land use in the county. We wish therefore to present the following recommendations:



*Birdwatching hide close to Stabbursnes nature reserve.*

- ♦ **Valdakmyra** in Porsanger is a very important staging site during spring and autumn migration. Here you have good possibilities of seeing the Lesser White-fronted Geese. On the ridge by the marsh a hide has been built which all may use. By using this hide, the chances are minimal that the geese and other birds that rest on the marsh will be disturbed. It is also important that one observes the rules about keeping dogs on a leash and the periods during which public access in the area is forbidden in spring and autumn.
- ♦ **Inner Porsangerfjord**, including mainland and islands, is also used by the geese for resting in May/June and August/September. It is therefore important that one avoids disturbance, especially with regard to movement along the shoreline and when visiting the islands.
- ♦ **The breeding grounds** on Finnmarksvidda are extensive. The first visits by the Lesser White-fronted Geese take place as early as May. Disturbance of the geese at their nest sites from late May/early June until mid-August, can lead to nesting failure. If you stay on Finnmarksvidda during this period, you should show great caution. Move quietly away and make a detour if you find Lesser White-fronted Geese in this period.
- ♦ **Hunting** is a widespread activity in Finnmark. All active hunters have a responsibility for learning the appearance and call of the Lesser White-fronted Goose: [www.luontoportti.com/suomi/en/linnut/lesser-white-fronted-geese](http://www.luontoportti.com/suomi/en/linnut/lesser-white-fronted-geese)  
Even though you hunt in the outer fjord areas or by the coast, you may see migrating Lesser White-fronted Geese flying over.
- ♦ **Observations** of Lesser White-fronted Geese are important. If you are quite certain that you have seen Lesser White-fronted Geese with young or showing obvious signs of breeding, then take contact with BirdLife Norway (phone +47 73 84 16 40), SNO-Lakselv (phone +47 91 62 20 03) or Stabbursnes Naturhus og Museum.





*Typical nesting biotope of the Lesser White-fronted Goose.*

## *A pet child has many names*

In common with many bird species, the Lesser White-fronted Goose has had many different names through the years. Norwegian names meaning both «lapp goose» and «mountain goose» have been used, while the present-day official Swedish name **fjällgås** also means «mountain goose». The corresponding Finnish name is **kiljuhanhi**.

In the South Sami language the Lesser White-fronted Goose has the name **skaanja**. In the North Sami dictionary, Lesser White-fronted Goose is a synonym for **giljobaš**. This word can be translated as «the little goose» or «little/low sound». The name **gálbenjunnečuonjá** or «calf-nose goose», also used in Finnmark, may have arisen among reindeer herders. The name probably refers to the similarity between the white forehead of the Lesser White-fronted Goose and the characteristic white nose of some reindeer calves. In Porsanger another name is used for the Lesser White-fronted Goose: **gavlačuonjá**. The origin and meaning of this word are unknown.



Stabbursnes Naturhus og Museum  
N-9710 Indre Billefjord, Norway  
Phone: +47 78 46 47 65  
[stabburs@online.no](mailto:stabburs@online.no)

*The Brochure is published by Stabbursnes Naturhus og Museum in collaboration with Norsk Ornitologisk Forening/BirdLife Norway.  
Photos and figures: Ingar Jostein Øien, Tomas Aarvak and Stabbursnes Naturhus og Museum.*



  
**Stabbursnes Naturhus**  
og Museum

