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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Canada Goose

Branta canadensis



Photo credit: Keay Wildlife Photography

Introduction

In a world where many species are nearing extinction every day, the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) is flourishing. In 1950, there were approximately 1 million Canada Geese in North America. Today those numbers are closer to 8 million. This increase is largely from successful management projects that involved refuge areas and careful hunting regulation.

Characteristics

The Canada goose has a plump body, long neck, and webbed feet. Although most Canada geese look alike, there are several different races. Scientists believe there are about 11 races. These races differ in size from the smallest goose, the cackling Canada goose, which can weigh as little as 1 kg (2.2 lbs), to the giant Canada goose, which can weigh up to 8 kg (18 lbs).

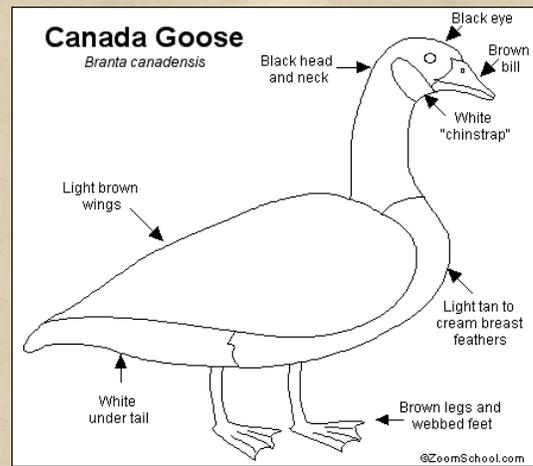
The average length of the Canada goose is 40 to 63 cm (16 – 25 inches), and its wingspans vary between about 90 cm (35 inches) and 2 m (72 inches). The Canada goose has a black head and neck with a black bill, while the underparts range in colour from light pearl-grey to chestnut, and even blackish brown. Its white throat patch extends up to the cheek. The goose's back, upper wing, and flanks are brown.

Differences in body proportions, particularly the relative length of the neck, the body shape, and the body stance, further distinguish the different races. In general, the larger the bird, the longer the neck and the more elongated the body.

How to identify a Canada Goose

- Length: 40 –63 cm (16-25 inches)
- Wingspan: 127 –172cm (50-68 inches)
- males and females have similar appearance

- Large long-neck
- Black bill
- Black head and neck
- White throat patch extends up to cheek
- Brown back, upper wing, and flanks
- Brownish-white breast and belly
- White upper tail coverts contrast with black tail
- White undertail coverts
- Great size variation, with some northern subspecies duck-sized offspring very similar to adult in appearance.



Lifecycle



Photo from: NHPT Nature Works

The goose (female) and the gander (male) are mates for life (up to 25 years). Only if one member of the pair dies will the other take another mate.

The geese begin building their nests in the early spring. Exactly when depends on how far south they are located. Generally, they begin in early March. The breeding is timed so that when the eggs hatch, the plants that the goslings eat have the highest nutritional value. The hatch date also allows the young geese enough time to be able to fly south before the freeze. The geese usually nest in the same area their parents nested and often return to the same nest year after year. Most nests are located near water and often on islands. The nest area is set up so that the female has a good view to watch for predators as well as is protected from the wind. The geese will nest on man-made platforms if there is nothing else around.

Some Canada geese breed as young as one year of age, but most wait until their second year.

The female lays five to seven eggs at a time. The older the goose, the more eggs she lays. Each set of eggs is called a "clutch." The female stays on the eggs while the male stands nearby, attacking anyone or anything that gets too close. The eggs hatch within 30 days and soon after, the parents lead the goslings to a more favorable feeding area. From the moment the goslings leave the nest they feed on plants and grasses found in the marshlands. Families nesting in the northern areas also feed on berries found close to the ground.

A newly hatched gosling looks much like a duckling with a coat of yellow-grey or yellow-brown down and a bill that is dark in color. After the first week or two of the bird's life, it develops into a grey fuzzy creature that is quite awkward-looking. In late summer, when the young geese are about nine to ten weeks old they are able to take flight. Their flight feathers have grown, and they now are a smaller version of their parents. At this age, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the female and the male, as both are similar in looks.

A family or clutch travels in unison with the female taking up the front position and the male following in the rear. When approaching or being approached by another family they often make a lot of noise and activity, however, actual fighting is rare. Usually the smaller number will always lose to the larger family.

By the end of summer only about half of the goslings have survived, and the northern breeders have put on an extra layer of fat for the flight south. They will soon join up with a few other families to begin the fall migration. As quickly as they arrived, they will be gone.

Habitat

Canada geese breed throughout North America with the exception of the high Arctic and the extreme southern U.S. and Mexico. It is not uncommon to see them nest as far north as western Greenland. They are also found in areas of Europe (Britain and Scandinavia).

Migration

Some geese spend the winter in southern Canada, from British Columbia all the way across to the maritime provinces, as long as they can find food and open water. The majority, however, will migrate to the U.S. and even northeastern Mexico.

Spring migration begins in the late winter and may take several weeks to complete due to the large amount of area they have to cover. The geese will move slowly northward, in their "V" formation, following the advancing line of melting snow. They stop at several key areas along the way to feed, rest, and build up reserves for travel and reproduction. The key areas have probably been used by the geese for many generations.

Once the snow begins to fall and the lakes and river start to freeze over, food sources become scarce. It is now time for the fall migration, which usually takes place in September or October. Following the same route year after year, families of geese are lead by the larger, stronger birds to their wintering grounds. The fall migration is quick trip, it is completed much faster than spring migration. If the conditions are perfect, the geese are able to fly at speeds up to 110 kilometres per hour (70 miles/hour) covering huge distances. Using radio transmitters, scientists have tracked geese that have flown up to 1000 km (600 miles) in one day.

As well as the fall and spring migrations, Canada geese will sometimes take part in a special trip called a moult migration. Canada geese need to replace their flight feathers every year and during this period of moult, they cannot fly for four to five weeks. At this time, they travel even further north than they usually do to breed. It is imperative they find a place where they feel safe from predators and have an abundant food supply. Geese who do not breed during the spring migration travel during May to June. Successful breeders travel later, once their goslings are able to fly.



Behaviour

Canada geese have one of the most distinctive calls. Each fall and spring the air is filled with the sounds of flocks of Canada geese. Smaller races have a high pitched cackling, while some of the large races have a rich musical honk.

Canada geese are social birds and have developed a communication system with at least 13 different calls to convey contentment, greetings, alarm, and to indicate gathering times. Adults begin communicating with their young while they are still in the egg. Once goslings have hatched, their communication with adults grows more and more sophisticated. Scientists have found that goslings will react in different ways to different calls coming from the adult geese.

Listen to the Canada Goose at: <http://www.ducks.org/waterfowling/gallery/index.asp?duck=4>

Threats

Gulls, bears, domestic and wild dogs, ravens, crows, skunks, and fox are all predators skilled at stealing eggs or killing goslings. The Arctic fox, a common predator in the north skillfully steals the eggs out of the nest to hide them and eat them later. Until the gosling's first birthday, it is in danger from almost every carnivorous animal. Eagles, coyotes, and the red fox have been known to kill adult geese while they are nesting. The larger races of geese will use their size to intimidate predators, making loud honks and spreading their wings as wide as they can to make them appear larger. Once the goose has reached one year of age it has gained a lot of experience dealing with predators and most will live up to 10 years or more.

Adult Canada geese are also a common game bird and are hunted by man for food and trophy.

What we can do to help

The giant Canada goose is an example of successful conservation management. They had all but disappeared from their range in the 1800's. It is not known exactly how this happened; however, the early settlers may have gathered up their eggs and slaughtered the geese in mass amounts during the flightless moulting season. In the early 1900's through to the 20th century, a successful breeding program was used to reintroduce the Canada goose to North America. Restoration was very successful and includes areas they may never have bred before.

In 1918 the Migratory Bird Treaty was passed in the U.S. and Canada. This treaty prohibited the spring hunt and limited shooting to a three and a half month period per year. The new hunting regulations place shooting season limits as well as bag limits on Canada geese depending on the population in the area. In 1980, a quota system was put in place to limit the amount of geese shot in a year.

Since the reintroduction and the implementation of the Migratory Bird Treaty and the hunting regulations, the Canada goose population has exploded to the point where they are now becoming a nuisance in some urban areas. The birds thrive in the protected, no hunting areas where they have few predators and an abundance of food sources. Problems with the growing numbers are vast and include contaminated drinking water from goose droppings, aggressive actions towards humans, and collisions with aircraft. The Canadian Wildlife Service is constantly monitoring the situation and coming up with new liberal hunting regulations and special monitoring programs in designated areas.

If you have a pond and are interested in building your own platform, visit this website:
www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/tools/ndblinds/canada.htm

Conclusion

The Canada goose story is one of successful wildlife management; however, we can still learn from the successes and problems arising from the expanding population.

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