Canada Goose
North Carolina Wildlife Profiles

Mark Buckler

Canada Goose
(*Branta canadensis*)

With its characteristic "honk", widespread breeding distribution and ability to adapt to suburban environments, the Canada goose is likely the most recognized waterfowl species in North Carolina. Although similar in appearance, Canada geese can be divided into 11 subspecies partially based on body size, subtle differences in coloration and breeding distribution. Although most sub-species or populations are migratory in nature, populations of non-migratory Canada geese have been increasing in North Carolina and elsewhere over the last 20 years.

Description

Considering all subspecies, there is sizable variation in body size. Adult Canada geese found in North Carolina typically average about 10 pounds and between 2 ½ and 3 feet in length. Males, also called ganders, are larger than females. Although the various subspecies differ in some ways, all have similar characteristics: a black bill, black legs and black feet; black head and neck, with a white cheek patch that usually covers the throat; back, wings, sides and breast are various shades of gray and brown; white belly, flank and undertail coverts. Black tail and rump are separated by a white V-bar formed by the white upper-tail coverts. Canada geese are easily distinguished by their "honking" call and appropriately nicknamed "honkers" by many people.

History and Status

North Carolina contains both migratory and resident (non-migratory) populations of Canada geese. In northeast North Carolina, during the 1940s and 1950s, numbers of migrant geese exceeded 200,000 in some years. Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge provided the core area at this time along with areas near Currituck and Pamlico Sound. In central North Carolina, the privately owned Gaddy's Goose Pond in Anson County once attracted 10,000 to 15,000 migrant geese. In general, numbers of migratory geese in North Carolina have declined dramatically over the last 60 years with perhaps no more than 10,000 to 12,000 geese currently in the primary wintering area in northeast North Carolina. Reasons for the long-term decline are complex and likely not the result of any one factor. Likely causes include changing farming practices in northern states that encourage geese to stop before they reach North Carolina, milder winters, and possible past overharvest of those geese with a strong desire to migrate to North Carolina.

Although, numbers of migrant geese have declined over time, resident flocks of Canada geese in North Carolina have increased just as dramatically. In the 1980's, several state wildlife agencies including the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) released Canada geese to help bolster declining numbers of migrant geese. Many of the geese released were of the subspecies *Branta Canadensis maxima* with weak migrating tendencies. The NCWRC released geese in coastal North Carolina and our

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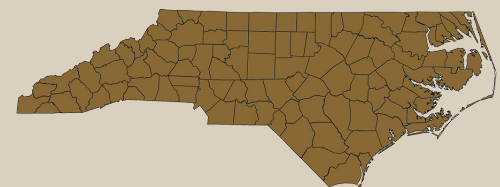

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Range and Distribution

Canada geese are the most widely distributed waterfowl species in North America. The breeding range includes most of the United States (including Alaska) and throughout Canada. Migrant Canada geese that winter in North Carolina nest primarily along the Ungava Peninsula in northern Quebec, Canada and along a portion of James Bay in southern Ontario, Canada. Resident Canada geese nest throughout North Carolina with highest concentrations in the central portion of the state.

Range Map

■ Canada Goose Range

current resident flock of Canada geese is a result of these releases as well as releases in adjacent states by other state wildlife agencies. The resident flock of Canada geese in North Carolina likely exceeds 100,000 birds.

Habitats & Habits

Canada geese are almost exclusively herbivores, feeding on seeds and leaves of a wide variety of plant species. Examples of preferred foods include lawn and natural grasses, clover, winter wheat and various aquatic plants. During fall and winter, waste corn is an important food item. Breeding and nesting habitat varies widely but generally includes elevated grassy areas near permanent water and arctic tundra, muskegs, and prairie pot-holes. Resident Canada geese in North Carolina nest in a variety of habitats including farm ponds, beaver ponds, and ponds found in housing developments. Canada geese will readily nest on constructed platforms built specifically for that purpose.

Nesting season varies considerably ranging from March-June in southern locations but usually in May for migrant geese in northern locations. In North Carolina, migratory Canada geese will start to arrive from their northern breeding locations in early October, but most birds do not arrive until mid-December. Return migration occurs from mid-February to late March. Flock sizes increase during fall and winter especially where migrant populations congregate at preferred locations. Flock size may exceed 1,000 birds and are most readily observed in these numbers when feeding in waste grain fields.

Human & NCWRC Interactions

In 1988 and 1989 the N. C. Wildlife Resources Com mission established field sanctuaries and feeding areas for migratory geese out of its concern for their dwindling population. In these feeding areas, plantings of winter wheat and corn have been left unharvested and hunting is not permitted.

Our resident (non-migratory) Canada geese can become tolerant of humans. In urban/suburban areas such as city parks and lakefront property there is often a temptation to artificially feed wild animals such as Canada geese. However, feeding of geese is discouraged. Feeding artificially concentrates birds in an unnatural setting creating a number of concerns including increasing the risk of disease transmission, making the geese dependent upon handouts, and spoiling beaches and lawns with large amounts of feces and feathers. Once large numbers of resident geese become established at an area and become habituated to human activities such as artificial feeding, they can become very difficult to remove and conflicts are inevitable.

References
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Wild Facts

Classification
Class: Aves
Order: Anseriformes

Average Size
Length: 24-48 in.
 (dependent on subspecies)
Weight: 2.5-18 lbs.
 (dependent on subspecies)
Wingspan: 52-75 in.

Food
Leaves of clover, grasses, cultivated grains. Preferred plants: ladino, alsike, red clovers, barley, wheat, rye, alfalfa, orchard grass, bluegrasses, creeping red and Kentucky fescue, timothy. Preferred grains: millets, corn, oats, buckwheat, soybeans.

Breeding/Young
Monogamous—male and female usually bond for life. Male is called gander, female is called goose. Sexually mature between 2 and 3 years. Most successful breeders are 4+ years. If one dies another mate is found. Among the first birds to nest in the spring. Adults raise a single clutch each year. In southern locations, a second nest may be attempted if the first nest fails.
The young are called goslings. Average clutch size of 5.14 eggs. Completed clutches range from 1-23 eggs. Incubation period is 25-30 days depending on the subspecies. Families remain together at least until after the young are able to fly and the adults have completed their molt.

Canada goose with goslings (Photo: Wikimedia)