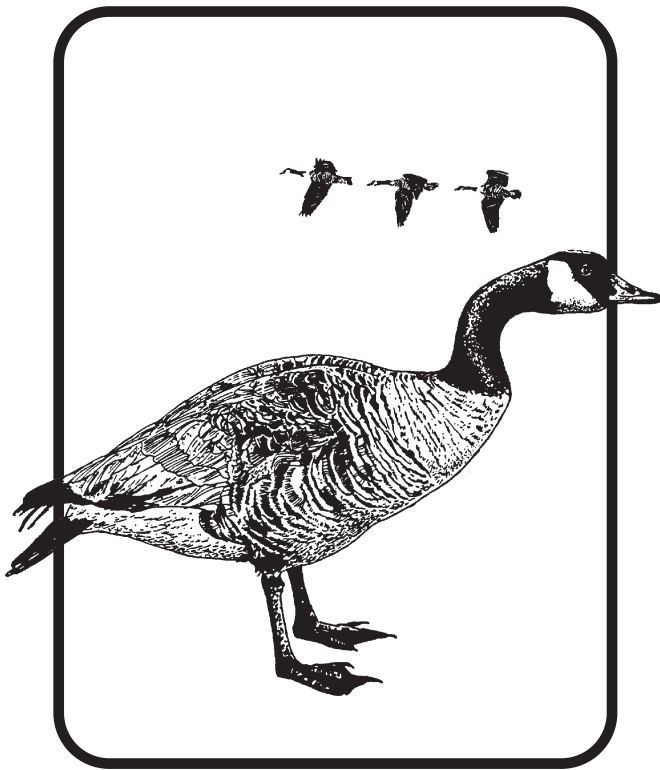


The Canada Goose

by Jim Low



Description and Distribution

Arkansas has three kinds of Canada geese. All three are the same species (*Branta canadensis*) but each is a different subspecies. The giant Canada goose (*subspecies maxima*) and the interior Canada goose (*subspecies interior*) are large water birds, measuring 35 to 43 inches in length. Giant Canada geese may have wingspans exceeding 4 feet, while the interior subspecies usually has a wingspan of about 3-1/2 feet. The giant variety can weigh more than 15 pounds, while the interior Canada goose seldom weighs more than 11 pounds. A third subspecies, *Branta canadensis parvipes*, is even smaller than the interior Canada goose, and makes up a very small portion of Arkansas's total Canada goose population.

Except for size, the three subspecies look alike. The appearance of the sexes in all three forms is identical also. The Canada goose's head and neck are black, with a white strap running from the chin around the back of the head.

Giant Canada geese live in Arkansas all year and are found almost entirely in the western half of the state. This type of Canada goose was once thought to be extinct, but the discovery of a small population in Minnesota in 1962 led to reintroduction of the subspecies in Arkansas and other states. The giant Canada has been re-established throughout its original range and now thrives even in some areas of the southeastern U.S. where it wasn't originally found.

The smaller varieties of Canada geese are migratory, spending only the winter in Arkansas. Arkansas's original population of migratory Canada geese was depleted by unregulated market hunting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But efforts by the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission have bolstered their numbers.

Habits & Habitat

Thousands of years before there were calendars to measure the progress of the year, Canada geese helped man keep track of the seasons. Beginning in March or April, they fly north to tundra nesting areas along the coast of Hudson and James bays and the Mackenzie and Keewatin rivers, where they nest.

In October or November they return to Arkansas for the winter. In mild winters, as few as 2,000 geese migrate to Arkansas. But in particularly cold years, as many as 50,000 have been seen here. Canada geese are a common sight statewide, but the largest concentrations occur in the Delta, particularly at White River, Wapanocca and Big Lake national wildlife refuges.

Canada geese prefer to look for food on land and are almost entirely vegetarian. They feed primarily on sprouting seeds or waste grain from stubble fields. In water, they eat seeds and roots of plants by tipping tail-up and searching for food beneath the surface with their long necks.

Canada geese post "sentinels" while feeding to keep a lookout for danger. They are extremely wary birds, and even those engaged in eating stop at frequent intervals to crane their necks and scan the horizon for predators.

Reproduction

Canada geese usually pair for life, which may last 20 years or more. They build their nests on the ground in marshy areas. The nests of giant Canada geese consist of mounds of reeds, leaves and soft grass lined with down from the birds' own breasts. They lay six or seven dull white eggs, which hatch in 30 days. If their nests are destroyed by predators, giant Canadas will lay a second clutch to replace the first.

Interior Canada geese usually build their nests on islands, using their feet to scrape out shallow depressions in hummocks and lining them with plants and down. They nest much farther north,

where the breeding season is short, so interior Canada geese do not enjoy the luxury of re-nesting if predators find their nests. They lay only four or five eggs, which hatch in 28 days.

Female Canada geese take care of incubation alone, but ganders are very attentive mates. They stay nearby and are fierce defenders of their young, using the bony leading edge of their wings to pummel predators.

Importance

Archaeological investigations have revealed Canada geese were a food source for Arkansas's earliest human inhabitants. Some modern Arkansans still have a taste for roast wild goose, but the number of goose hunters is relatively small compared to the thousands who hunt ducks.

Canada geese can become expensive nuisances when they descend on unharvested grain fields, but they are easily discouraged.



Management

Arkansas began reintroducing giant Canada geese in 1982, bringing more than 2,500 birds from Illinois and Canada to Lake Dardanelle and other lakes in western Arkansas. In 1988, an aerial count of Arkansas's resident giant Canada geese showed 175 breeding pairs, about three times the number counted just three years earlier.

It's difficult to estimate just how large Arkansas's population of migratory Canada geese has grown, since "our" geese are mixed in with varying numbers of geese from Midwestern states in any given year. Counts taken in early December, before the weather gets cold enough to force large numbers of geese down from northern states, indicate Arkansas probably has 5,000 to 10,000 migratory Canada geese to call its own.

The Commission has taken a conservative approach to Canada goose hunting seasons. The season on honkers was closed in 1979, and wasn't reopened until 1989. The idea was to let Arkansas's flock continue to grow until it could sustain an annual harvest.

With financial support and sportsmanlike conduct of hunters, Canada geese will continue their role as harbingers of the seasons in Arkansas. Now, as thousands of years ago, men awake in the night and hear choruses of disembodied voices drifting down from the sky, announcing the imminent arrival of spring or the approach of autumn. Arkansans who aren't moved by this ancient seasonal ritual must either be utterly cut off from their natural heritage or lack a shred of the poet in their souls.



Arkansas Game & Fish Commission

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