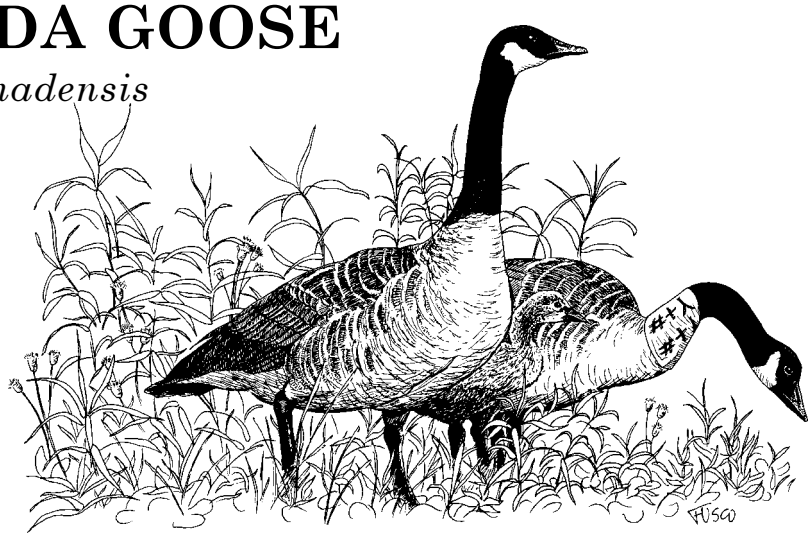
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

CANADA GOOSE

Branta canadensis



Habitat: Lakes, marshes, fields, golf courses, park ponds, reservoirs. When inland freshwater areas freeze, the birds concentrate in the bays and inlets of Long Island Sound.

Weight: 6 to 13 pounds in Connecticut, depending on subspecies.

Length: 22 to 48 inches, depending on subspecies.

Food: Aquatic plants and seeds, clovers, cultivated grains, and lawn grass.

Identification: Connecticut's largest native waterfowl species, the Canada goose is easily recognized by its black head, bill and neck that contrast strikingly with its pale gray breast. The distinct white cheek patch, or chinstrap, that covers the throat is a characteristic field mark. The birds are gray-brown to dark brown on the back and wings and white on the belly; they have black rump and tail feathers which are separated by a narrow but distinct band of white feathers.

Range: The "migrant" populations of Canada geese nest in Alaska and northern Canada and winter to the southern United States. "Resident" populations of Canada geese, which are non-migratory, have become established since the 1950s and nest throughout the United States.

Reproduction: Canada geese are among Connecticut's earliest spring nesters. They may defend territories in March and nest in early April. Yearlings generally do not attempt to nest; about one-third of the two-year-old birds do nest, as do most of the three-year-olds. Canada geese are monogamous and pairs mate for life. They use a variety of nest sites, such as islands, man-made structures, muskrat and beaver lodges, and shoreline edges. Nest site requirements include proximity to water, cover for the nest, and good visibility for the incubating bird. Usually four to seven white eggs are laid and incubated by the female while the male stands guard a short distance away. Incubation lasts about 28 days. Hatching occurs from April through June, with the peak occurring the first week of May. Nesting success and gosling survival are generally high. Most nest losses are caused by flooding, desertion, and predation. Egg predators include raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes, dogs, and gulls. Young goslings may be preyed upon by snapping turtles, gulls, owls, and coyotes.

History in Connecticut: The Canada goose was abundant in Connecticut during colonial times, principally as a migrant. Unregulated hunting and market hunting in the 1700s and 1800s brought about a population decline; however, protective measures in the early 1900s gradually reversed this trend. Releases of geese by game breeders and sportsmen (following passage of legislation abolishing the use of live decoy flocks in 1935), as well as releases by private groups have greatly increased the population of resident geese.

Since winter waterfowl surveys began in Connecticut in the 1940s, Canada goose numbers have steadily increased from average midwinter counts of 138 in the 1950s to 5,000 in the 1990s. This phenomenal increase is apparently due to the goose's adaptation to man's

landscaping practices. Canada geese seem to be moving into every area of the state with the right combination of water, cover, and grazing areas. The hundreds of new ponds and lakeside lawns created since the 1950s have resulted in a large expansion of the goose population. The current high survival rate and moderate reproductive rate has also allowed the population to increase in size. Presently, geese nest statewide, with the highest number in Fairfield County.

Interesting Facts: Flocks of geese travel in long lines, flying in V-formations. Their raucous honking can be heard for miles. The resonant calls from flocks of migrating geese have long been a welcome harbinger of autumn.

Year-round resident geese breeding in the state are distinct from migratory populations that nest in the northern Canadian provinces. Most migrant geese that occur in Connecticut breed in Labrador, Newfoundland, and northern Quebec, arriving in Connecticut in early October. Migration continues through November with another peak number of arrivals coming in mid-December. Most migrant geese leave the state by mid-January to continue further south. However, in some years with mild winters, substantial numbers of migrant geese have remained in Connecticut the entire winter.

Resident geese sometimes serve as decoys, attracting migrant waterfowl. This can lead to crowded conditions and encourage the spread of diseases through the wild population. (Further complicating the situation in Connecticut is the feeding of geese by the public. Geese fed nutritionally deficient food, such as bread, may be more susceptible to disease.)

Conservation and Management: Canada geese, as well as all migratory game birds, are managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Biologists try to manage the migrant and resident populations differently even though the two overlap during fall and winter and are indistinquishable in appearance. Generally the migrant population is susceptible to high hunting pressure because of their long migration. The resident population has too little hunting pressure. Special hunting seasons, timed to occur when migrants are not present in Connecticut, are used to direct hunting pressure toward resident geese. Hunting is an effective management tool which can reduce nuisance problems. However, many nuisance geese problems occur in urban and suburban areas where hunting may not be a viable option.

Management of Nuisance Problems: The local resident goose population has had a different impact on the public's perception of these birds. Too many geese on public parks, ballfields, beaches, golf courses, and residential lawns can create nuisance problems and occasionally public health problems. Geese can litter an area with their droppings. Large flocks of geese can overfertilize water bodies with their droppings which could result in algae blooms. Geese can cause economic damage when feeding on newly planted farm crops, winter cover crops, and pasture areas. Such nuisance problems can cause the public's attitude toward geese to change from regarding them as an asset to a liability.

There are no easy solutions to nuisance goose problems. Canada geese are persistent when they have become habituated to an area. Control methods include modifying the habitat, putting up barriers, and frightening.

Modifying the Habitat: As long as favorable habitat is available, geese will be attracted to an area. Plant unpalatable vegetation, such as pachysandra, to replace some of the mowed lawn. Allow grass to grow tall which makes it unpalatable to the geese. Plant hedges or visual barriers between feeding areas and water. Be sure the geese are not being fed artificially by people.

Barriers and Exclusion Methods: Low fences are very effective at keeping geese from lawns especially during June and July when geese have molted their flight feathers and are unable to fly. A 3-foot high chicken wire or weld wire fence should be used. Soft or hard nylon fences are also potential barriers.

Frightening Methods: These methods are convenient and relatively inexpensive. However, geese can become accustomed to repetitious methods especially when they realize that it poses no danger. Frightening programs should be planned early to prevent the birds from establishing a daily feeding pattern. Efforts should be directed at sunrise and sunset when geese come in to feed. Do not allow even one goose to remain as a decoy. Be persistent because it will take several days to break habitual feeding patterns.

(1) Bird control pyrotechnics such as shell crackers (12 gauge shotgun) and whistler/screamer rockets fired over the flock travel up to 250 feet and will frighten geese away.

(2) Visual frightening methods such as helium balloons (mylar, rubber), flags, and scarecrows are most effective when used in conjunction with other methods. Large helium balloons tethered with 20-40 feet of line can be placed over lawns or ponds. Geese do not like objects moving above their heads. Flash tape, a one-half inch mylar plastic, strung like a string fence at one and two feet above the ground will act as a frightening barrier.

(3) Free-ranging dogs trained to chase geese are very effective. Even tethered, or slip-wired tethered dogs that permit extensive movement, have merit.

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Illustration by Paul Fusco