

The city goose and the country goose -- a tale of two changing habitats

by Jo Seltzer, special to the Beacon

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This is a tale of the city goose and the country goose.



Canada goose and goslings
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Let's start with the city goose. In the winter, a visitor to Forest Park may see a few hundred Canada geese. Most of these will be gone by the spring, as they migrate north. But the subspecies native to the state, the resident giant Canada goose remains here for the winter, beginning its nesting preparations.

Nesting period starts in mid-March and peaks in mid-April. During this time, the male goose becomes aggressive toward humans as he protects his mate while she sits on the nest and takes care of the newly hatched goslings. An adult giant Canada goose can weigh up to 16 pounds, so if one confronts you hissing and honking, give him a wide berth.

Many of us become aware of the city goose as we begin to enjoy the spring weather in our favorite local park. The city goose—AKA the Canada goose—has become a nuisance in many urban green spaces.

The country goose -- aka the snow goose -- minds his own business. For us, these geese are mostly out of sight and out of mind as they pass through in the late winter and early spring. But they have become a threat to the Arctic environment where they hatch their goslings.

Young geese go on a “spring break”

Each summer, around the time of the solstice, geese lose their flight feathers, and are unable to fly for about a month. At the end of this molt period, both parents and children have new flight feathers. The goslings imprint upon the area where they learn to fly and will return to that area when they are ready to establish their own nests.

But the geese don't usually reproduce until they are 3-4 years old.

During the summers of their adolescence, the 1-and 2-year old Canada geese go on a “molt-migration,” much like young humans who satisfy their wanderlust with an extended trip after college. They fly to the Hudson Bay and join all the migrating geese sub-species for that one summer molt. In the fall, they fly south, where they settle down and begin to raise their families. Normally, they migrate only short distances for the rest of their lives.

Canada geese, like other geese, are monogamous. With their life-long mates, they incubate 5-7 eggs each breeding season, and stay with the goslings for their first year.

Erin Shank, urban wildlife biologist with the Missouri Conservation department, says the department fields hundreds phone complaints every April about aggressive geese.

As recently as the 1960's, the giant Canada goose was thought to be extinct. When several small populations were discovered, wildlife agencies worked to protect these North American natives. Their success has been spectacular. Naturalists estimate that the population of these former wetland dwellers has reached about 3.5 million nationally; 50-70,000 live in Missouri.

What caused this population explosion? Canada geese share an aesthetic with humans. Their preferred habitat is a pond or lake surrounded with grass mowed down to the water's edge, giving them clear sight of predators like foxes and raccoons. Such a manicured environment is found in urban parks, subdivisions, and office parks. The geese are even happier if a fountain is part of the lake or pond, because the aeration keeps the water from freezing in cold weather.

So as swamps and wetlands gave way to subdivisions and office parks, the giant Canada goose was able to move right in to safer surroundings. The subspecies doesn't mind being around people, especially if the people feed them. Of course, as they exploit the kindness of strangers, their droppings make a mess of the lawns and they are apt to overgraze the area.

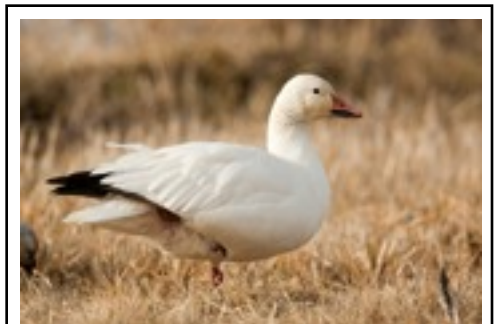
But on the whole, city dwellers and city geese have adapted to one another. And while their numbers increased exponentially during the 1990's, the census in Missouri seems to have stabilized over the past ten years, according to Andrew Raedeke, Missouri Waterfowl Resource Scientist.

The Country Goose

The country goose, AKA the snow goose, has also experienced a population explosion during the last 40 years, after a decline in the early 1900's.

While the Canada goose is in your face, you usually need to seek out the snow goose. These country geese will visit for days or weeks, roosting in groups of thousands on large bodies of water such as "Swan Lake" in the Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge near the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. During the first week in March, one wildlife refuge in central Missouri hosted over one million of these travelers.

Snow geese require open water and grain fields. As Ken Dalrymple of Calhoun County, IL's Two Rivers puts it, they use crowd psychology, massing together at night on the deepest part of the water, and then scavenging for waste grain *en masse* morning and evening. With this life style, they have few successful predators. They will stay in an area until the food is exhausted, or until snow comes.



Snow goose
Photo courtesy of Missouri
Department of Conservation



Not a picture by M.C. Escher, but a photo of a flock of snow geese.

Courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Snow geese nest in the salt marshes of the Arctic tundra, arriving in April and early May. They hatch the goslings in the short summer, and begin the long migration as far south as Mexico in September. They are outstanding flyers. They fly at high altitudes—from 1000 to 10,000 feet in noisy groups at speeds of about 50 miles per hour. They fly at night as well as during the day, and if necessary can go 1700 miles in one flight. However, most do stop along the way at wildlife refuges for days or weeks. As they return to nesting grounds during the three-month spring migration, they feast during their travels and can gain up to two pounds per bird.

The snow goose population explosion is resulting in destruction of the tundra where they nest. There are simply too many birds eating the vegetation that bursts out during the short summer. Considering that a newly hatched gosling weighs just 2.5 ounces, but grows to about 5 pounds in 90 days, it is easy to see that about 4.5 million nesting birds could easily denude their home area.

Naturalists have no simple explanation for the population explosion. A leading hypothesis is that the coastal marshes where they used to feed on aquatic plants during the winter have been greatly reduced, and replaced with rice farms that can feed a bird very well. With ample nutritious food, more birds may survive to the next nesting season. And mating pairs that lay eggs every year for nearly 20 years only need four progeny to survive to double the population.

Wildlife management measures to reduce the snow goose population have mainly consisted of expanding the hunting seasons and limits. Naturalists worry about scenarios like mass starvation, or massive disease outbreaks that could destroy other bird populations. They also worry that the tundra may never recover from overgrazing.

The planet changes constantly. A new fashion in landscape design has an impact on the population of one species of goose. And in the case of another species, a change in feeding patterns may lead to destruction of a habitat thousands of miles away.