

Status: Abundant Native Migrant

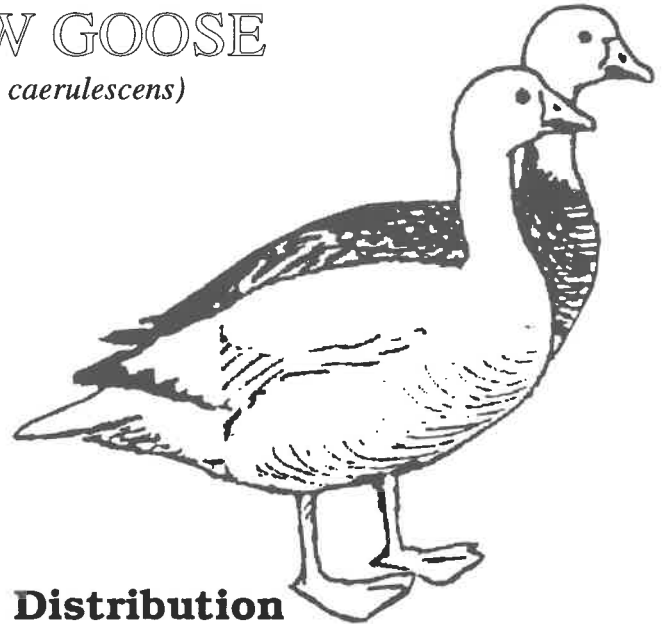
LESSER SNOW GOOSE

(*Chen caerulescens caerulescens*)

Description

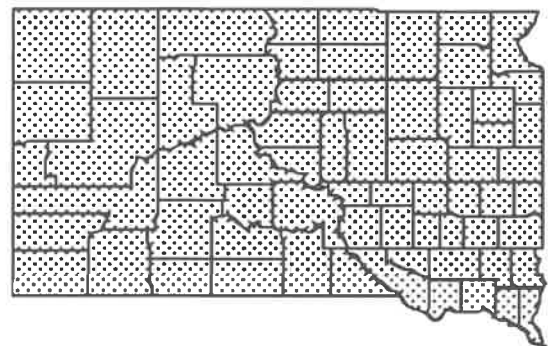
Lesser snow geese, which fly through South Dakota, are the smaller of two *subspecies* of snow geese, the larger *subspecies* being found on the east coast of the United States. The genus name, *Chen*, is Greek for goose and the species name is Latin for bluish. Lesser snow geese can be one of two colors, white (snow) or gray/blue (blue), thus their common names, "snows and blues." It was once thought that these two colors of geese were separate species. Since they interbreed and are found together throughout their ranges, they are now considered two color phases of the same species. These colors are genetically controlled with the dark phase resulting from a single dominant gene and the white phase being *homozygous recessive*. When mating the young will select a mate resembling their parents. If they were reared by a mixed pair, they will mate with either color phase.

They stand 25 to 31 inches (63.5-78.7 cm) tall and weigh 4.5 to 6.5 pounds (2-3 kg). The adult snow phase is all white with black wing tips. The immature snow phase also has black wing tips, but all other feathers are sooty or dirty white. The adult blue phase has a gray/blue body, black wing tips, a white neck and head, and varying amounts of white on their bellies. The immature blue phase is drab or slate-gray with little to no white on the head, neck, or belly. Both snow and blue phases have rose-red feet and legs, and pink bills with a black "grin patch." The colors are not as bright on the feet, legs, and bill of immature birds.



Distribution

Lesser snow geese are found throughout South Dakota during their spring and fall migrations. They are more common east



of the Missouri River. Snow geese often concentrate on or near Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Brown County and in Brookings, Kingsbury, and Lake counties. In any given year, large concentrations may be in other areas of eastern South Dakota as well.

Natural History

Snow geese migrate through South Dakota between early March and early

April in the spring and mid-October and mid-November in the fall. They migrate in flocks of 100 to 1,000 or more. During migration, they often fly at altitudes of 2,000 to 5,000 feet (308-1538 m) and occasionally as high as 10,000 feet (3,077 m) or more. In late April of 1991, an estimated 1.2 million snow geese were in the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge area at one time. At that time, this total was 60% of the mid-continental snow goose population. In 1996, the mid-continental population was estimated at just under 3 million birds.

Snow geese travel through South Dakota to and from their wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast and their breeding grounds on the Arctic tundra of Canada. Major breeding concentrations are along the Hudson Bay and on Baffin Island. Snow geese nest in large colonies with as many as 1,200 nests per square mile. There are as many as 500,000 snow geese in some of these colonies. Snow geese nest in June and July, laying 3 to 8 white eggs per nest. The females *incubate* the eggs for 23 to 25 days while the males stand guard. The *goslings* can fly 38 to 49 days after hatching. The number of young produced in any given year depends largely on how early the tundra surface begins to melt, vegetation begins to grow, and the adults can begin to nest. The birds leave the tundra to begin their fall migration in early to mid-September.

Glossary

Clutch - the number of eggs laid in a nest at one time.

Goslings - young geese.

Homozygous recessive - having two identical forms of the gene for a characteristic, both of which are recessive, i.e., ones that would not be expressed if a dominant form were present.

Incubate - to keep eggs in a favorable environment for hatching which is accomplished by the female sitting on the eggs in the nest.

References

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On the tundra, snow geese eat grasses, marsh vegetation, and other plants. Traditionally, snow geese eat marsh and upland vegetation during their migration. They have adapted to changes caused by human development and now feed primarily on agricultural crops during their migration.

Conservation Measures

During the 1990's, the mid-continental snow goose population has been increasing. They are nesting in such high concentrations that they are stripping the tundra of the very vegetation that they need to survive. It is feared that their population may crash from disease and/or the damage they are causing to the Arctic tundra. Federal, state and private agencies are keeping a close watch on the health of these populations. Licensed hunters are allowed to shoot a specified limit of geese during designated times of the year. The money derived from license fees and taxes paid by the hunters is used to care for and protect wildlife populations. Limits have been increased to allow hunters to harvest more snow geese to hopefully prevent an uncontrolled population crash. However, it is uncertain if hunters can sufficiently decrease the population.