



BIRDS

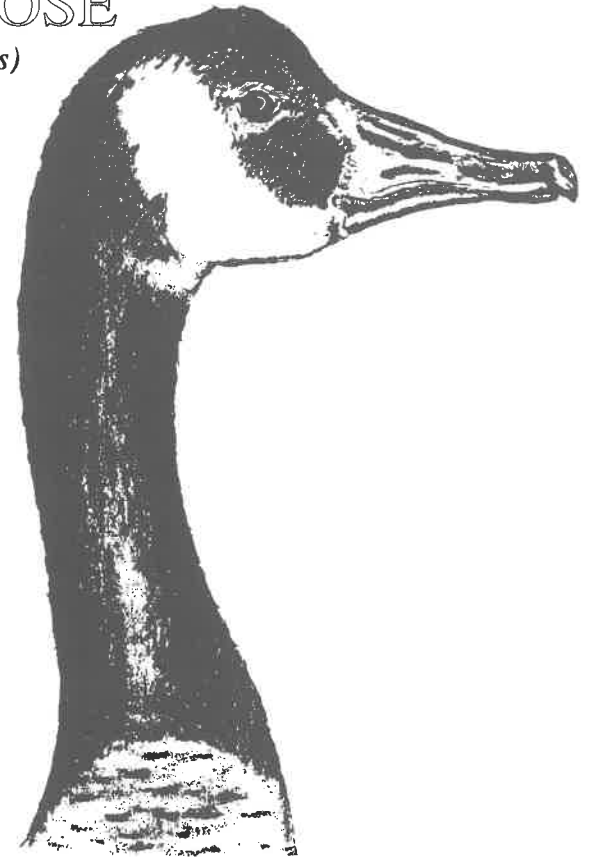
Status: Abundant Native

CANADA GOOSE

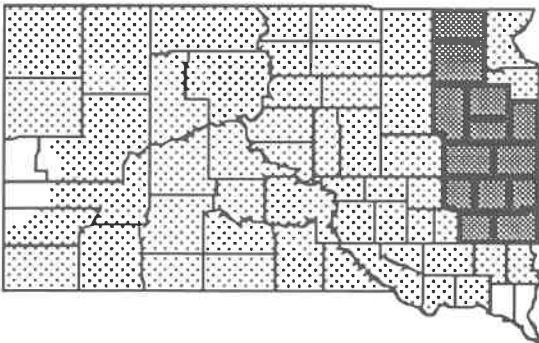
(*Branta canadensis*)

Description

The Canada goose is the most widespread and most familiar goose in North America. Although most people can easily identify this species with its black head and neck, white chin and cheek patch, and clear honking call, they don't realize there are 11 recognized *subspecies*. These *subspecies* range in size and weight from almost as large as a swan (up to 18 pounds; 8.2 kg) to a little larger than a mallard (about 4 pounds; 1.8 kg). Both sexes of Canada geese look alike and all have the following in common: black bill, legs and feet; black head and neck with white cheek and throat patch; gray-brown to dark brown back and wings; breast and sides gray to dark brown; and belly and rump area white with black tail feathers.



Distribution



South Dakota Breeding Range of Giant Canada Geese. Lightly shaded counties are areas where the geese are common. In darkly shaded counties, geese are abundant.

The breeding and wintering ranges of the Canada geese cover most of Canada and the United States. There are five *subspecies* that migrate through and use South Dakota. The most commonly known of these *subspecies*, and the only one that nests in South Dakota, is the giant Canada goose (*B. c. maxima*). Today, the giant Canada goose breeding population is abundant in east-central and northeast South Dakota, while common elsewhere. Of the *subspecies* that just migrate through South Dakota,

the largest concentrations occur along the Missouri River in the central part of the state. Other concentrations occur at the Big Stone power plant, Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Shadehill

Reservoir, and LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge. Because of open water in the Pierre area, large numbers of geese overwinter there.

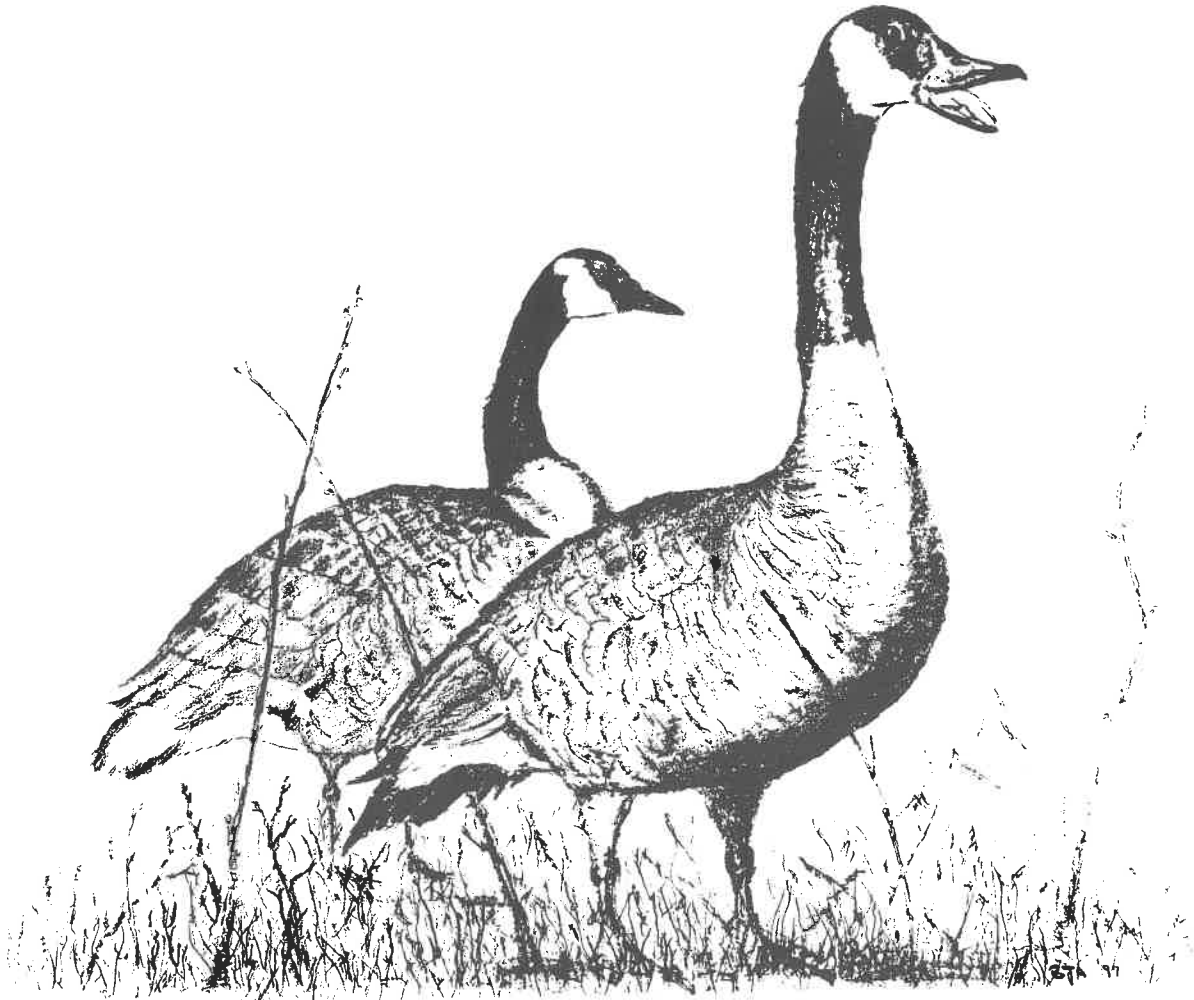


Figure 1. A Pair of Adult Giant Canada Geese.

Natural History

Local nesting giant Canada geese are the first to arrive back to South Dakota in the spring. Depending on the weather, some will arrive in mid-February, but most usually arrive in early March and remain in the state until fall migration, which begins in early October. The giant Canada goose is the first of all waterfowl species to begin nesting. Egg laying begins around the first of April. Canada geese form *pair bonds* and mate for life, but when separated by death, the

survivor will seek a new mate. Canada geese have a long life span, documented at over 30 years old. Pair bonding will occur with 2 year olds, but most will first attempt nesting at 3 years of age. Fall migration begins in early October.

Canada geese are very *territorial* and both sexes defend the nest site. Preferred nest site locations are muskrat houses, islands, nest structures, and shorelines in open areas around lakes and wetlands. The nest size of Canada geese shows greater variation than that of any

other bird species. Nests of giant Canada geese are large, ranging from 17 to 48 inches. (43-122 cm) across. Giant Canada geese lay 5 to 7 eggs per nest. The female *incubates* the eggs, while the male stands guard a short distance away. *Incubation* lasts for 28 days, with another 2 days to complete the hatching and for the young to be ready to leave the nest. Both parents protect the young (see Figure 1). The female will *brood* the young at night or during inclement weather throughout the first week and less often thereafter. The young grow fast and attain flight at 8 to 10 weeks of age. Adults *molt* their *primary wing feathers* so both are flightless at the same time the young are growing. Adult giant Canada geese are capable of flight again at about the time their young reach flight stage.

This species is a grazing bird that feeds on a variety of grasses and water plants, but readily takes advantage of agricultural grains

Significance

The increase in breeding range and population of the giant Canada goose in South Dakota is one of the most successful accomplishments of wildlife management. The near extinction of this *subspecies* early in this century was caused by settlers' unlimited gathering of eggs and shooting of adult birds for food. Giant Canada goose populations

rebounded after strict management regulations were initiated. Significant restoration efforts began in 1962 by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks in cooperation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, sportsman, and landowners. It is this cooperation that has made this program so successful. Many different types of nesting structures were strategically placed and maintained. These structures have helped achieve a high level of nesting success during the re-establishment of giant Canada geese throughout South Dakota.

Conservation Measures

Giant Canada geese are very responsive to management and readily use nest structures provided by humans. A continued interest to place and properly maintain these nest structures will ensure a healthy goose population for years to come. The protection and enhancement of our lakes and wetlands will be effective in future management of giant Canada geese in South Dakota. Today, federal, state and private agencies keep a close watch on the health of these populations. Hunting is used to manage this species. Licensed hunters may shoot a specified limit of geese during a designated time of the year. The money derived from license fees and taxes paid by the hunters is used to care for and protect these populations.

Glossary

- Brood** - the young baby geese hatched from a nest and the actions carried out by a female allowing the young to huddle under her wings next to her body for shelter and warmth.
- Incubation** - to keep eggs in a favorable environment for hatching which is accomplished by the female sitting on the eggs in the nest.
- Molt** - annual shedding and replacement of feathers necessary because of wear.
- Pair bond** - a relationship when a male and female select each other and stay together throughout their life.
- Primary wing feathers** - flight feathers toward the wing tips that are attached to the hand and finger bones.
- Subspecies** - a group of living things that, although members of a species capable of interbreeding with other members of that species, have recognizable differences in either physical appearance or behavior.
- Territorial** - defensiveness by animals of an area of land in order to exclude other members of the same species.

References

Bellrose, Frank C., 1976, Ducks, Geese, & Swans of North America, A Wildlife Management Institute Book; Stackpole Books: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 17105.
Rue III, Leonard Lee, 1974, Game Birds of North America, Outdoor Life; Harper & Row: New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London.
SDOU, 1991, The Birds of South Dakota, NSU Press: Aberdeen, SD 57401.

Selected Resources For Teachers

Rearing and Restoring Giant Canada Geese in The Dakotas, A Publication Prepared Cooperatively By: North Dakota Game, and Fish Department, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service; Published in 1984 and available from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Pierre, SD.

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