

## Canada Goose

*Branta canadensis*

The Canada goose is one of the largest species of waterfowl in North America. It's also one of the most well-known and most widely distributed of all North American birds.

There are 11 races of the Canada goose in North America. Of these races, the majority of Canada geese in North Carolina probably belong to the "interior race." This is a medium-sized race that breeds from James Bay in Ontario eastward to the Ungava Bay region of Quebec.

### History and Status

The resident populations of Canada geese (those that breed within the state) are now increasing but the wintering populations are decreasing. During the 1940s and 1950s, Canada goose populations were the highest ever. For several years, more than 200,000 birds were present in North Carolina, 25,000 in Florida, and a few thousand in Georgia. The largest number ever recorded in North Carolina was 236,650 birds in 1944. As is true today, Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge was the center of the state's flock at this time, and Currituck Sound and Pamlico Sound were important locations for geese as well. In central North Carolina the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge served as a core for flocks of geese.

The population of Canada geese migrating to and wintering in North Carolina has been decreasing for the last 30 years. Reasons for the decline have included probable over-hunting in North Carolina, changing farm-

ing patterns in northern states that have encouraged geese to stop before they reach North Carolina, and heavy mortality during Northern hunting seasons.

### Description

Canada geese are herbivores that feed on the seeds and leaves of clover, aquatic plants, grasses and cultivated grains, and many other plant and animal foods. Canada geese are known as "honkers" because of their deep honks that are heard at great distances. Their nearly 5-foot wingspan enables them to fly with long, powerful strokes. The birds are over 2 ½ feet in length; some adults weigh over 16 pounds.

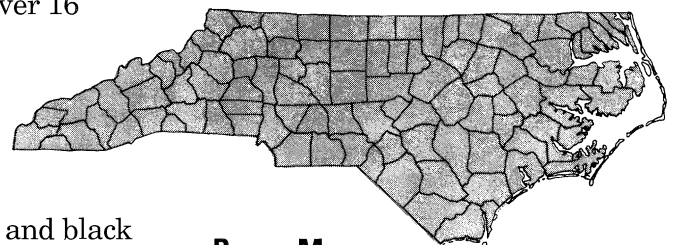
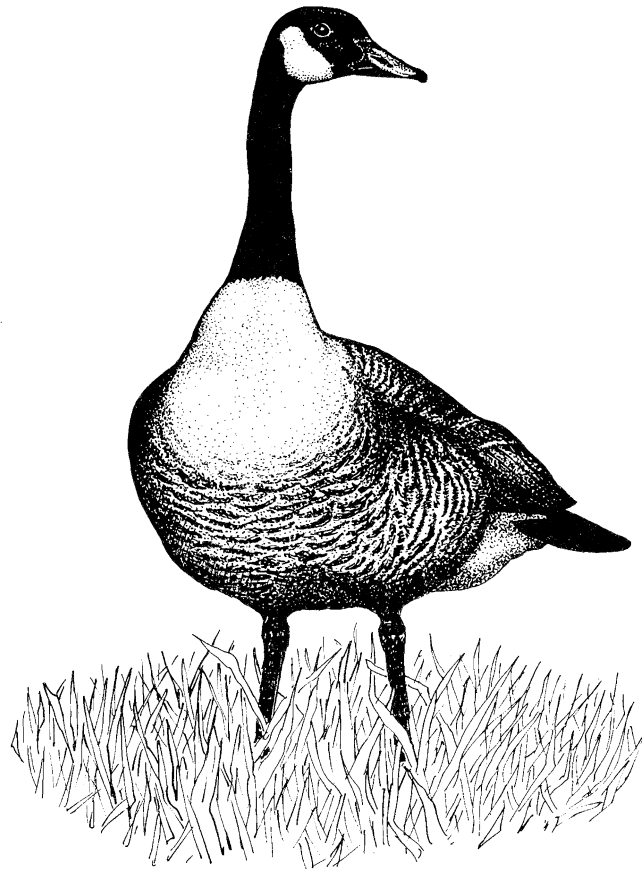
The 11 races of Canada geese differ in some ways but all have similar characteristics: a black bill, black legs and black feet; black head and neck, with a white cheek patch that usually

covers the throat; back, wings, sides and breast in various shades of gray and brown; white belly, flank and undertail coverts. Black tail and rump are separated by a white V-bar formed by the white uppertail coverts.

The "interior" goose is a medium to large Canada goose. Canada geese fly in a V-formation, but they sometimes fly in trailing lines.

### Habitats and Habits

Since there are so many races of the Canada goose it is difficult to define its habitat range. In general, nearly all the non-mountainous areas of Canada and Alaska can be considered breed-



**Range Map:**  
Found statewide.

ing habitat. Wintering areas for Canada geese include coastal estuaries, impoundments and lakes in the continental interior. Sufficient habitat consists of safe roosting areas and plenty of food in the form of aquatic plants, grasses, grains and various agricultural crops.

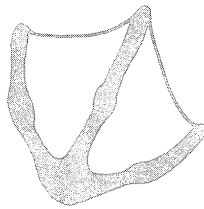
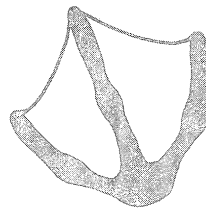
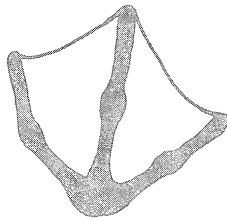
Northern-bred migrants winter from New England to South Carolina, migrating in flocks that vary in size with the different races of geese. Small geese tend to migrate in larger flocks than large geese. The altitude at which geese migrate varies with weather conditions. When the weather is overcast, geese fly only a few hundred feet over the ground. When skies are fair, some geese have been reported by pilots to fly at altitudes of over 8,000 feet. During fall migration, geese fly at heights averaging 2,000 feet. During spring migration, altitudes are not quite as high.

### Range and Distribution

Canada geese nest in the northern part of the continent in the Canadian tundra marshes that extend from the Arctic coast as far south as the southern United States. Most Canada geese winter from the northern United States to the Gulf of Mexico. In winter they can also be found from southern British Columbia to Southern California and from Nova Scotia to South Carolina.

### People Interactions

The Canada goose is a wary waterfowl species that usually avoids close contact with humans. Canada geese can cause damage to such crops as corn, wheat and other grains. In 1988 and 1989 the N. C. Wildlife Resources Commission established field sanctuaries and feeding areas for geese out of its concern for their dwindling population. In these feeding areas, plantings of winter wheat and corn have been left unharvested and hunting is not permitted



3½ in.

### References

Bellrose, Frank C. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* (Stackpole Books, 1980).

Bent, Arthur Cleveland. *Life Histories of North American Wild Fowl* (Dover Publications, 1987).

Johnsgard, Paul A. *A Guide to North American Waterfowl* (Indiana University Press, 1979).

### Credits

Written by Kyle Martin.

Illustrated by J.T. Newman.

Produced August 1992 by the Division of Conservation Education, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

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## CANADA GOOSE

### Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Anseriformes

### Average Size

Length: 24-48 in. (dependent on subspecies)

Weight: 2.5-18 lbs. (dependent on subspecies)

Wingspan: 52-75 in.

### Food

Leaves of clover, grasses, cultivated grains. Preferred plants: ladino, alsike, red clovers, barley, wheat, rye, alfalfa, orchard grass, bluegrasses, creeping red and Kentucky fescue, timothy. Preferred grains: millets, corn, oats, buckwheat, soybeans.

### Breeding

Monogamous—male and female usually bond for life. Male is called gander, female is called goose. Sexually mature between 2 and 3 years. Most successful breeders are 4+ years. If one dies another mate is found. Among the first birds to nest in the spring.

### Young

Called goslings. Average clutch size of 5.14 eggs. Completed clutches range from 1-23 eggs. Incubation period is 25-30 days depending on the subspecies. Adults raise a single clutch each year. Families remain together at least until after the young are able to fly and the adults have completed their molt.