

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## GREATER SNOW GEESE ABUNDANT ONCE MORE ON ATLANTIC COAST

Greater snow geese which winter only along the Middle Atlantic Coast are expected to show up in numbers so abundant this fall that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has lifted its ban on hunting this species which has been in effect since 1931.

The Interior Department agency estimates the fall flight of greater snow geese should approach 200,000 birds. This contrasts with a population of about 7,000 when the ban was invoked. Credit for the recovery is attributable to years of favorable breeding ground conditions, the biological factors influencing production, and the understanding and support of hunters during the decades of closed seasons.

The seasonal movement of birds, long a mystery to man, conflicts with the steady disappearance of suitable wild living space for geese like the greater snow because they are indelibly marked with the natural urge to winter in traditional locations. Cotton Mather, 17th century New England minister, unfortunately did not have the migration mystery solved when he proclaimed, "The wild pigeons on leaving us repair to some undiscovered satellite accompanying the earth at a near distance."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Migratory Bird Management has a unique opportunity to study the greater snow geese. Unlike Aristotle, who taught that birds slept under the mud in marshes during the winter, the precise breeding areas, staging areas, migration routes, and wintering areas of these species are well known because of studies conducted by the Service and Canadian wildlife agencies. Spring and fall staging area population estimates based on aerial photography and ground surveys cover approximately 95 percent of the total population. Satellite photography of the Arctic breeding grounds now provides an early indication of the year's habitat conditions and probable production success. So, a comprehensive evaluation of the annual status of the greater snow goose population is readily available.

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The species restricts itself to east coast salt marshes where it prefers to eat cordgrass. The snow goose has a tendency to pull the plant out by the roots. Because snow geese often feed in flocks of several thousand birds they can denude an area in a relatively short time and create salt pans where grass will not grow again for many years. Since 1970 salt marsh cordgrass habitat has been damaged extensively in New Jersey wintering areas by feeding greater snow geese. In Virginia and North Carolina greater snow geese have taken to feeding in fields of winter wheat crops. In Canada when the greater snow geese assemble along a 100-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence River each fall before their migration south, wildlife officials fear that the natural food supply in the river staging area is not capable of supporting a larger goose population.

Greater snow geese nest in the Arctic and subarctic area of northern Baffin Island, Ellesmere Island, and adjacent Greenland. Their migration south each fall, triggered by shortening days, sees them leapfrog from the Arctic region to the St. Lawrence River area of Canada in mid-September. Then as colder weather sets in and the food supply dwindles along the river the birds follow their instinctive urge to winter in the same spot their parents guided them to as young birds. In early November they fly to the salt marshes stretching along the east coast from New Jersey to North Carolina.

Management of greater snow geese consists primarily of acquiring and setting aside natural tracts of salt marshes for the wintering geese and then insuring that this natural space is not disturbed. The Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina, for example, was established specifically for greater snow geese. A total of 10 national wildlife refuges dot the coast from New Jersey to North Carolina.

The greater snow goose has been hunted continuously in Canada since the Migratory Bird Treaty Convention of 1916. All hunting occurs on a 100-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence River northeast of Quebec City where the species gathers prior to migration. The total Canadian annual harvest has never exceeded 7,000 birds.

The 1975 U.S. harvest is not expected to exceed 5,000 birds, with a 10,000 bird harvest considered an extreme estimate. The combined Canada-U.S. greater snow goose harvest, therefore, will not exceed 10 percent of the fall flight population. No significant limiting effects on the greater snow goose population are expected by this magnitude of harvest.

The 1975 season regulations refer to snow geese generally, because some lesser snow geese, including blue geese, gather with greater snow goose flocks on the wintering grounds. However, the lesser snow goose is the most numerous goose on the North American continent, and it will not be adversely affected by the limited harvest expected.

An emergency closure provision is included in the snow goose season regulation to provide insurance against excessive harvest in the event that greater snow goose productivity did not approach the expected level in 1975.

