



NEWS RELEASE

from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

October 11, 1995

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ATLANTIC FLYWAY CANADA GEESE: A TALE OF TWO POPULATIONS

The majestic Canada goose is posing a unique problem for wildlife biologists in the Atlantic Flyway: how to properly manage a game species that is divided into two populations, one overly abundant and one in sharp decline.

Decades ago, the vast majority of Canada geese in the flyway migrated north to nest in Canada in the summer months and south to warmer weather and more abundant food supplies during the winter.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, wildlife managers began widespread relocation of non-migrating Canada geese from the Midwest to many areas throughout the eastern United States where non-migrating populations had once existed but were extirpated by human development. Also, the lineage of some resident birds in the Atlantic Flyway can be traced back to remnants of decoy flocks maintained by market gunners in the early 1900s.

These non-migrating birds settled onto golf courses, urban parks, and other protected areas offering excellent year-round habitat: areas low in predators and high in food supply.

As a result, the flyway came to host two distinct populations of Canada geese, "resident" and "migratory." Though the birds are indistinguishable from each other, they do not interbreed even when mixed together nor do individual birds change from one population to the other.

The problem currently facing wildlife biologists is that the migratory population has declined dramatically in the past decade while the resident population has exploded to the point that the birds are considered a nuisance in many areas.

Surveys conducted in the migratory population's nesting areas on the Ungava Peninsula of northern Quebec show that the number of breeding pairs has fallen 75 percent since 1988, from 118,000 down to 29,000.

Mid-winter estimates of the entire Atlantic Flyway population show only a 33-percent decline since 1986, from 900,000 birds to 650,000. Therefore, the large numbers of resident birds are essentially masking the decline of the migrant population.

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Biologists blame the decline on two factors: extremely poor habitat conditions and nesting success in the late 1980s and early 1990s combined with several years of high harvest.

In particular, breeding success was poor in 1992. Since it takes young Canada geese 3 years to reach reproductive age, the full impact of that year's poor production was realized this year. More restrictive hunting regulations imposed in 1992 were largely ineffectual in decreasing the number of geese taken.

This summer, the Atlantic Flyway Council, representing wildlife agencies from 23 eastern states and Canadian provinces, recommended to the Service that the 1995 hunting season on migratory Canada geese be suspended in light of the extreme declines in the migratory population. The Service agreed with the recommendation and final regulations suspending the season were issued in late September.

The suspension may or may not continue next year, depending on how the population responds. A decision will not be made until next summer, and only after a thorough review of available information and a recommendation made by the Atlantic Flyway Council.

However, wildlife biologists are quick to point out that since it takes a goose 3 years to reach reproductive age, the recovery of the migrant population may take several years.

The Government of Canada is also cooperating in this conservation effort. Canada suspended seasons for migratory Canada geese in key areas of Quebec and eastern Ontario. Canada's aboriginal people, who have conducted a subsistence hunt for centuries that is guaranteed under the Canadian constitution, have also agreed to reduce their normal harvest in light of the population decline.

Hunting for resident geese has continued in both countries, however. Many states have special seasons on Canada geese in September, before the migratory geese arrive, and late January and February, after they leave.

"Some people wonder why there is a problem with Canada geese when there are so many of them around," said Paul Schmidt, chief of the Migratory Bird Management Office for the Service, "but the overabundance of resident geese is hiding a serious problem. Reducing the hunting pressure on the migrants is the only way to ensure we will have a healthy population and a healthy waterfowling tradition in the future."