



# Fact sheet

## A Goose is a Goose? Identifying Differences Between Migratory and Resident Canada Geese

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**M**any New Jerseyans are aware that two distinct populations of Canada geese occur in the Garden State. This fact sheet provides information on the identification of migratory and resident Canada geese as well as differences in behavior, habitat, diet, and nesting. Information on the regulatory status of Canada geese is also included.

### Identification of Canada Geese:

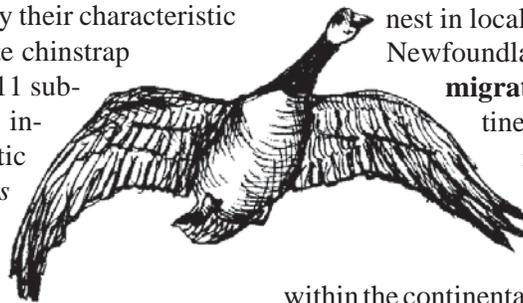
Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) exist in each of the United States, excluding Hawaii, each Province of Canada, and several States of Mexico. Canada geese are easily recognizable by their characteristic black head and neck with white chinstrap and cheek-patches. There are 11 subspecies of Canada geese; four inhabit New Jersey. The Atlantic subspecies (*Branta canadensis canadensis*) is predominant, although the western (*Branta canadensis moffitti*), interior (*Branta canadensis interior*), and giant (*Branta canadensis maxima*) subspecies can also be found in our state.

The four subspecies of Canada geese that predominantly reside in New Jersey are similar in appearance, but genetic and physical differences do exist. However, the main visible indicators that separate subspecies of Canada geese can be difficult to see. The sex of a Canada goose is also difficult to

determine visually. At a distance, the sex of geese can only be assumed because of the larger size of the males. However, size differences between the sexes can be misleading in cases where resident and migratory geese mix together because female resident Canada geese can be larger than migratory males.

### Migratory vs. Resident Canada Geese:

Two distinct populations of Canada geese can be found in New Jersey and throughout the continental United States. 1) **Migratory Canada geese** nest in localized areas throughout Canada, Newfoundland, Labrador, and Alaska and **migrate** annually to winter in the continental United States with some reaching as far south as northern Mexico. 2) **Resident Canada geese** nest and/or reside predominantly within the continental United States and typically **do not migrate** to annual wintering grounds. As the name suggests, they are usually permanent residents of the area in which they are found.



The resident Canada goose population in the Atlantic Flyway consists of subspecies that were introduced in the early 1900s. States that make up the Atlantic Flyway include Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina,

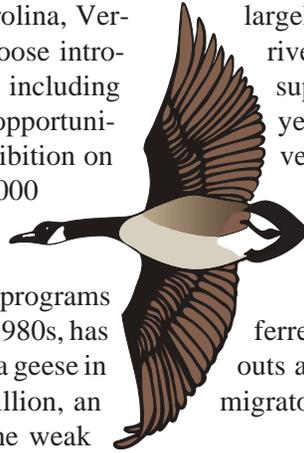
Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia. Goose introductions occurred for many reasons, including aesthetics and additional sport hunting opportunities. Following the 1935 Federal prohibition on the use of live decoys, more than 15,000 domesticated and semi-domesticated geese were released from captivity. That, combined with goose restoration programs that took place from the 1950s through 1980s, has helped the population of resident Canada geese in the Atlantic Flyway grow to over 1 million, an average increase of 14% per year. The weak migratory tendency of resident Canada geese, combined with the availability of suitable habitat and climates found throughout the continental United States, has also contributed to the population growth of resident geese.

There are no obvious physical differences in appearance between migratory and resident Canada geese. The biggest difference between the two populations is behavioral. Migratory Canada geese nest in Canada and are typically found in New Jersey from October through March. Resident Canada geese nest and can be found within New Jersey year-round.

### **Migration, Habitat and Food Habits:**

Goose habitat is typically comprised of wetland areas and fields with short vegetation. Their diets often include submergent vegetation (plants that grow under water), grasses, sedges, and agricultural crops like winter wheat, rye, and small grains. Migratory Canada geese differ from resident Canada geese in that they endure longer periods when food is restricted. Migratory geese time their northward migration to arrive at the breeding grounds when the snow has melted and nesting sites are available. During migration food sources may be limited due to snow cover. The availability of food may remain low until shortly before eggs start hatching when new grasses and sedges become available.

Resident Canada geese, as well as migratory Canada geese, while in our area, are closely associated with human dominated landscapes, and their diets can be



largely dependent upon sources of food derived from human activities. A constant supply of food is provided throughout the year by agricultural crops, pastures, lawn vegetation, and waste grains in addition to natural wetland vegetation. Mowed lawns in areas such as recreational and industrial parks, cemeteries, and golf courses offer tender new growth preferred by geese. Gardens and human handouts also supplement the diets of resident and migratory Canada geese in New Jersey.

### **Nesting Season for Resident Canada Geese:**

Canada geese usually build their nests within 150 feet of a water body, although resident Canada geese demonstrate remarkable flexibility in nest site selection. Nesting sites typically include islands and hummocks as well as pond and riverbanks. Resident Canada geese also use human-made structures such as elevated tubs, platforms, hay piles, rooftops, parking lots, and abandoned cars. Canada geese usually use the same nesting site every year.

Female Canada geese begin the nest by making a shallow depression in the soil. Vegetation such as twigs, grasses, and cattails are gathered from the area and used to construct a nest up to 2 feet in diameter, lined with feathers from the female's breast. In addition to usually being close to the water, nests are often somewhat sheltered, but still allow a clear view of the surrounding area and potential predators.

Egg laying begins immediately upon completion of the nest. An egg is laid about every 2 days. An average clutch (group of eggs) will have 6 eggs. Incubation is performed completely by the female while the male stands near, ready to defend and attack any potential predator (including humans). The incubation period lasts 25–30 days and will not begin until the last egg is laid so the goslings will hatch on the same day. In the event that nests or eggs are destroyed, Canada geese often establish a second nest and lay another clutch of eggs. In New Jersey, resident Canada geese may begin nesting as early as

March. The nesting season usually concludes in June, with the peak of resident goose nesting activity occurring in April and May. It takes goslings about 3 months to gain their flight feathers and look like adults. During this time the parents will remain close-by and vigorously defend the goslings against any potential threats.

### **Regulatory Status of Canada Geese:**

Canada geese, both resident and migratory, are considered a migratory species according to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. All migratory species come under the jurisdiction of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Therefore, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service has ultimate management authority for resident and migratory Canada geese with input from individual states via the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central, or Pacific Flyway Councils. Flyway Councils include representatives from member states and provinces and make recommendations on matters regarding migratory game birds. For more information on the management of Canada geese consult **FS1017, Regulations Governing the Management of New Jersey Wildlife** (J. B. Paulin, D. Drake and J. L. Bucknall, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, 2002).

### **Summary:**

Distinct differences between migratory and resident Canada geese are found within New Jersey and in the rest of the continental United States. However, physical differences can be difficult to see even for

trained wildlife biologists. Although several factors differentiate migratory and resident Canada geese, the main factors are that resident Canada geese typically do not migrate, and therefore, usually nest within the continental United States. For additional information contact:

- New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, 609-292-2965.
- United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services, 908-735-5654.
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Permits, 413-253-8643.
- Your local Rutgers Cooperative Extension County Agent. Refer to the blue pages of your local phone book for listings.

### **References:**

Bellrose, F. C. 1980. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America, 3rd Edition*. Wildlife Management Institute. Stackpole Books. Harrisburg, PA.

Kelly, F. A. 2000. "Draft, Management of Canada Geese in Suburban Areas." New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. Division of Watershed Management.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. "Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Resident Canada Goose Management."

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