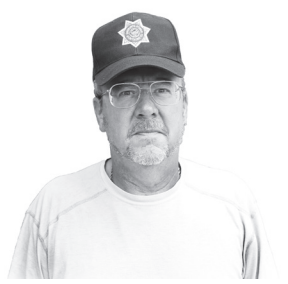




A close-up of a snow goose showing the beautiful white colors that give him his name. (Courtesy photo/USFWS)



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

About a century ago, or so it seems, I was a field director for the Colorado Waterfowl Association. This company leased up thousands of acres of waterfowl hunting grounds and managed it for waterfowl hunters. Some places were designated strictly geese, while others for ducks.

They built blinds to hunt from, limited the number of hunters, and overall managed the property for the benefit of waterfowl, protecting the habitat year-round, and keeping tabs on the population so no over hunting occurred.

This job required me to be in the field 5 days a week, patrolling the property for trespassers and poachers, and getting in a little hunting during the

season for myself. It was a tough job, but someone had to do it. Unfortunately, it did not pay very well and I soon, had to seek actual employment from a real job.

The geese always were the most spectacular to watch and listen to. A flight that has set their minds on lighting in a field, make enough noise to wake the dead. If a person has any wild blood in them whatsoever, they will stop what they are doing and listen to the honking of a landing flight, staring in awe, and I am no exception.

Back in the 1970's, most of the geese that came into the flyway that cuts across Eastern Colorado, were greater Canadian geese. Very rarely, perhaps once or twice a season, a snow goose would be spotted. Just getting to see one was a conversation starter amongst outdoor folks.

In recent years, Snow Geese have skyrocketed in numbers and are now among the most abundant waterfowl in North America. When watching huge flocks of snow geese swoop down from the sky, amid a cacophony of honking, is akin to standing inside a snow globe.

These loud, mostly

white with a touch of black geese can cover the ground in a snowy blanket as they eat their way across cornfields or wetlands. Among them, you might catch a glimpse of a dark form, standing out among the white. This is the color variant called the Blue Goose, and a rare sight indeed.

The snow goose goes by *Branta canadensis* in case you were wondering what a game biologist would call him. They are a medium sized bird, being around 32 inches long, and measuring up to 55 inches for the wingspan. Most weigh-in around 31/2 pounds, but a bird not watching his calories can touch 8 pounds. Obviously, they look much larger than they are.

The most abundant species would be the lesser snow geese, followed by the greater snow geese and Ross's geese. They all nest in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Canada and migrate and winter throughout the United States. Ross's geese are often mistaken for lesser snow geese due to their similar appearance. Ross's, however, are smaller and have a much shorter bill, but they do mix extensively with the

snows on the wintering grounds.

Snow geese are eating machines. During the winter, they feed 2 to 7 hours a day, while in spring when they build up fat reserves for migration, they may feed more than 12 hours a day.

Snow geese nest in colonies on the Arctic tundra. The female builds a shallow nest with plant material and down from her body. Each pair will defend the area around the nest. Sometimes another pair will trespass, and the male will try and drive them off, but not before the interloper female drops an egg near the defender's nest. Because an unattended egg attracts predators, the home female usually rolls the extra egg into her nest containing 3 to 7 of her own eggs, where she will hatch it and raise it as one of her own.

The female will incubate the eggs for up to 23 days while the male remains on guard in the area around the nest. Within hours of hatching, the goslings will leave the nest, already able to walk, swim, dive and feed. Fast growers, the goslings gain about 5 ounces a day in body weight. The family may walk 2

miles a day between food sources, and as much as 45 miles a day during the brood-rearing season.

Young geese can fly around 45 days after hatching. Adults can reach 50 mph in flight. They will migrate south with their parents and remain with them through the return trip back north the following spring. The family will break up when it arrives back on the hatching grounds where the adult birds begin rearing another brood.

Around 1900 the population had dropped to less than 3,000 birds, but during the 20th and 21st century, the population exploded as snow geese began taking advantage of farm crops along the migration route and wintering areas. In some areas, the population has increased as much as 9 percent a year.

Biologists estimate there are 15 million lesser snow geese, 1.5 million Ross's geese, and just over 1 million greater snow geese, too many to be environmentally sustainable. When the populations are too large, the geese feed themselves out of their own habitat, which is also used by other species. Hunting is the primary management tool, but

hunters only remove about a half million geese a year.

Most snow geese in Colorado appear on the Eastern Plains, sometimes in January, but more in February. In recent years, more and more have begun to appear in the valley areas of the Western Slope, again, usually in February and March.

I don't hunt waterfowl very often anymore, having turned my attention to the big game species, and in most recent years, the dangerous game of the world, but I still get a thrill when I see and hear a flight landing in a cornfield.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



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