

# Juba Takes a Gander at the Canadian Goose

By Penny Randell

And a HAPPY SUMMER to all you folks out there! Juba signing in while turning my eyes toward the skies above, searching for the famed “V” formation of the migratory Canadian goose. These birds are common, even in mountain communities, where they can be found gathering in large groups. Such staging or resting areas serve as communal territory where these gregarious critters bond, mate and even lay eggs. Although the autumn migration -- September until the beginning of November -- remains the largest with the greatest number of participants, smaller migrations throughout the year do exist. Early travelers tend to take to the air and spend less time cavorting on the ground.

But, let's take a biological assessment of this bird known as *Branta canadensis*...the Canada goose. First of all, they are easy to spot, especially around fresh water. They are large with a black head and neck, white cheeks and white under their chin. Their body is brown with white by their tail. This wild animal is native to the Arctic and temperate regions of North America, occasionally seen traversing the Atlantic Ocean as they head to Northern Europe. Being primarily herbivorous, they have no problem finding food along their travels.

This goose is extremely proficient when living in human-populated areas. They seek out safety from predators while establishing breeding colonies in urban and cultivated habitats, especially parks. This isn't all good, however, for this fellow is often considered a pest species. Folks complain about their excrement, destruction of crops and their noticeably loud noise. They are known for aggressive and territorial behavior toward humans and other animals, but most of all their habit of stalking and begging for food from those who choose to ignore feeding policies concerning wild animals.

The seven subspecies of this animal greatly vary in size and plumage, yet all are recognized as Canadian geese. Ranging in length from 30 to 43 inches, their wingspan can be anywhere from 50 to 73 inches. The bill ranges from 1.6 to 2.7 inches. A male usually weighs between 5.7 and 14.3 pounds, with all subspecies averaging 8.6 pounds. The female looks identical to the male but smaller, averaging a weight of 5.3 to 12.1 pounds. This makes it almost impossible to discern male geese from females. Nonetheless, sound can help to identify sex. The *honk* belongs to the call of the male and the *hrink* rises from the female. These vocalizations are similar, but the *hrink* is shorter and higher pitched. Their *hiss* is the sound that evokes fear, as they resort to this when agitated or defending territory. In total, the Canadian goose communicates using ten different sounds, each in response to varying situations.

As are most geese, the Canadian goose is naturally migratory, wintering in most of the United States. Notice the calls overhead from large groups of these birds flying in their “V” shaped formation that signal the change from spring to fall. Due to changes in habitat and food sources, migration can be greatly altered. Considering mild climates, some populations have even adapted to being nonmigratory if food and water is adequate and if there is a lack of predators. Males often give to agonistic behavior both on and off breeding and nesting grounds. This behavior encompasses any social action related to fighting. The term has a broader meaning than aggressive

behavior because it includes threats, displays, retreats and even placation. Naturally, agonistic behavior occurs between contestants for food and mates. Other times it involves a basic test of strength or basic threat display that make animals look larger and more physically fit. Depending on availability and importance of a resource, behaviors can range from fight to the death or much safer ritualistic behavior.

As said, Canadian geese are primarily herbivores, although they sometimes eat small insects and fish. Their favorite foods consist of green vegetation and grains. While on land they eat a variety of grasses by grasping the shoot with their bill and jerking their head to get it free. They also eat beans and grains such as wheat, rice and corn when available. When winter comes they are capable of lowering their heads into the water and sliding their bill up the plant to gain the nutrients. They do well with aquatic plants and take in algae and even seaweed. When confronted with urban areas, these confident animals pick garbage from bins. Some geese become so habituated they eat grains from the hands of humans.

Amazing as it is, these geese are monogamous, remaining a “pair” throughout their lives. If one dies, the other may even remain single. Usually the Canadian goose finds a mate during its second year of life. Females lay anywhere from two to nine eggs, with an average of five. Both parents are responsible for the eggs and stick close by through incubation. Nests are often built high above waterways, or occasionally found in a beaver lodge. The eggs are laid in a shallow groove within the foliage that is usually lined with plant material and down. During the Incubation period the male may forage for nearby food while the female covers the eggs. The incubation lasts for 24 to 32 days after laying. This animal can react to climate changes by adjusting their laying date to coincide with warmer days.

The annual summer molt occurs during the breeding season when all adults lose their flight feathers for 20 to 40 days. These flight feathers are long, stiff and asymmetrically shaped, but symmetrically paired on the wings or tail of their body. The primary function here is to aid in the generation of thrust and lift. These feathers regenerate and the bird regains its ability to fly about the same time as their goslings start to fly.

Speaking of goslings, as soon as they hatch they are capable of walking, swimming and finding their own food. Parents are often seen leading their goslings in a line, with one parent in front and one behind. These critters can become violent when protecting their offspring. Whether approached by anything from a small black bird to an upright human, these guys will come at you flapping their wings with intent to bite. Canadian geese are especially protective of babies and territory. This lasts until the fledgling stage when the babies fly away at anywhere from 6 to 9 weeks of age.

Goslings and eggs are always targeted by coyotes, foxes, raccoons, large gulls, ravens, crows, and of course, bears. Nonetheless, because of their large size and aggressive behavior, adult geese are rarely preyed upon. When they are taken it is usually by a coyote, grey wolf, avian predators, such as snowy owls, eagles and an occasional falcon. Contrary to endangerment, this wild species has become so habituated with humans they tend to stick around in huge groups and often become a nuisance. It is not uncommon for a flock to be seriously culled, as they force themselves upon humans at golf courses, beaches, parks and parking lots. Indeed, this is something to look into. In

the meantime, the Canadian goose is making casual appearances throughout our community. Juba here, saying admire from a distance and don't get involved in feeding these geese...ever!