

# Nootes on Population Status, Breeding Habits and Conservation of Canadian Goose (*Branta Canadensis*) In Central New Jersey, USA

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## Editorial

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## Editorial

One of the most common and conspicuous waterfowl in North America Canadian Goose, *Branta canadensis* is a large brownish bird with prominent black head. Its neck, cheeks and under chin is white, whereas beak, legs, outer wings and outer tail feathers are black. Lower abdomen and vent is also white. Their loud honking calls while on flight are also diagnostic. As given in Encyclopedia Wikipedia this is one of the oldest described birds whose nomenclature was given by Carl Linnaeus himself as back as 1772. There are 11 known subspecies recognized from different geographical locations in the world, of which 4 subspecies are reported from USA. But ornithologists often disagree on certain sub-specific forms. They largely occur in USA and Canada but are also found in different parts of Europe, New Zealand, Argentina, Chili and Falkland Islands.

Large flocks of Canadian Geese are seen in almost all parts of New Jersey in big grassy lawns and meadows. They also frequent in grain fields and wetlands. They feed actively during most hours of the day, occasionally also grazing at night. During summer they feed on grasses and sedges largely, while during winter they depend on berries and grains. In public gardens they often turn to human and beg food. Their early morning and late afternoon noisy flights to and from roosting site to feeding grounds are spectacular; mostly fly in V-formations. Sometime a long curve-line in the sky is also very scenic. Flocks keep together by honking calls. It is

interesting to note that when the leader of the flock honks the rear guard bird responds in similar tone; as if assuring 'all is well'!

In absence of any threatening predator or disturbance by human, they allow close proximity when foraging on the ground. However, in certain human settlements 'Geese Chasers' are hired to chase them out of compound because feces of geese produce foul smell. The trained Geese Chasers use dogs to ward off them in morning and afternoons. However, animals quickly get 'used to' to such devices. As I learnt by interacting with some Geese chasers, this method is only partly effective. Other methods to deter them are mowing and maintaining grasses and by putting plastic mesh over the grasses. At times automatic lighting and sound devices are also effective, particularly during nights.

This reminds me my observations in Lokh (Scottish version of lake) Stretbeg near Aberdeen, Scotland in 1992. I used to count 15 to 16 thousand geese of different species in surroundings of the Lake while perusing a Post Doc Diploma from Aberdeen University. The main objective of the project was to find out the impact of various deterring devices to prevent the grazing geese. We also experimented to find out whether the geese prefer natural or grasses grown with fertilizers. Those days there was big conflict between sheep farmers and nature conservationists in that area. The farmers were

oppressed by large flock of geese which used to graze on ship farms depriving of quality grasses to sheep. I also took part in another similar project on Barnacle Goose (*Branta branta*) at Calaverock Wetland Waterfowl Trust refuge, near Dumfries. Perhaps the Barnacle goose stands out first among avian species on which maximum research papers have been published on various aspects of breeding, population status and migration [1].

There are two types of population of Canadian Geese in New Jersey: resident and migratory. The migratory population stays here between October and February. The resident population which were developed initially in 1960s to supplement the then declining population, breed in this area between May and September. Availability of suitable habitats and strict hunting regulations, the population of resident geese bounced back quickly. According to North American Breeding Bird Survey total American population of Canadian Geese in 2015 was 4.2 to over 5.6 million, whereas their population in New Jersey was estimated 81000.

Geese may also pose danger to humans as carrier of several pathogens and Bird Flu virus H5N1. Geese often hit the low flying aircrafts and may cause serious hazards. As given in a report, out of 9500 aircraft accidents due to birds hit in USA since 1990, 5300 were owing to Canadian geese hits. Economy loss on account of geese feeding in agriculture is also quite considerable. However, the ecologically beneficial role (such as seed dispersal and food for other animals, etc) is far more than losses incurred by them.

I observed four pairs breeding Geese during the breeding season 2018. Two pairs were recorded at the bank of ponds near Somerset Run Complex entrance and another two pairs near Belle Mead Farm. Although I did not have opportunities to observe them regularly, I kept a note on the growth of chicks and parental care. Three pairs raised 4 goose-lings while the 4th pair had three. I started observing the chicks from May 15 (chicks appeared to be 2-3 days old at that time) until June 30. The growth of the goslings was quite fast and within 50

days the young were almost equal to size of parents but looked paler in coloration. The parents were very agile while crossing the interior road and path; always uttered alarm calls and postures on approach of the vehicle or other object. The chicks obediently ducked or seized their movements. Male and female both were on guard most of the time. As given in various reports the clutch size of Canadian geese is 2 – 8, Incubation period 25 -28 days, while Nestling (Fledgling) period 42 -50 days. Their life span is 10 to 24 years. The fledglings were recorded pecking and picking objects from early on and appeared yellow brown in the beginning but slowly acquired paternal colorations. I did not notice any predation or death of the goslings, although, there are abundant Red-tailed hawk and American crows in this area. It is reported that the Canadian geese pair for life and there is very low 'divorce report'. The pair remains together throughout the year. Parents raise only one brood per season. Generally the chicks achieve maturity in two years [2,3].

According to IUCN Category of Conservation Status, Canadian Geese are listed in Schedule 5, meaning least concern. In New Jersey their population appears to be stable. But considering the fact that over 2.6 million geese are harvested annually in USA it is desirable to constantly monitor their population. Over hunting may pose similar threat as in 1960s when these beautiful and elegant birds were endangered and were listed in Schedule 1.

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