

## Giant Canada Goose

*Branta canadensis maxima*



Have you seen a Canada Goose lately? Of course you have! (And just to be correct they are “Canada” Geese, not Canadian Geese). Canada Geese are very common in our area all year round. So common in fact that they can be pests if they congregate in some areas. However, they have not always been abundant.

There are at least ten races, or subdivisions, of Canada Geese. They differ mainly in size. The smallest is just slightly larger than a Mallard Duck. The largest is the “Giant”, the largest Goose in the world.

Canada Geese are native only to North America but have been introduced in many areas around the world. Each race has its own nesting areas and migration patterns.

If you haven’t guessed by now, the Giant Canada Goose is Iowa’s nesting population. In the 1800’s the Giants were common nesters, especially on the prairie wetlands of northcentral and northwestern Iowa. Loss of habitat (we drained the wetlands) and excessive hunting destroyed the Giant race. By 1900, geese no longer nested in Iowa, and by the 1930’s the Giants were considered extinct.

If you’re as old as I am, you may remember when the only Canada Geese we saw were migrating through in spring and fall. Nesting Canadas were long gone from memory.

Although the Giant Canada Goose was well known to long ago generations of hunters in the Northern Prairie states, “modern” biologists considered them to be a myth.

A few people still believed in their existence, however, and a discovery in January, 1962, proved them right. A small flock of Canada Geese had been returning every fall to Silver Lake in Rochester, Minnesota. Silver Lake was kept partially open by the warm water from a power plant, and the flock would remain there for the winter.

The “Believers” insisted that most of the Geese were too large to be a smaller race. They convinced the “Experts” to come weigh the birds. The flock of about 200 birds were caught and weighed. The “Experts” even had to be convinced that the scales were accurate. But they finally had to concede that not only did the Giant race exist, it was not quite extinct.

With this amazing discovery, the Department of the Interior, many state’s Department of Natural Resources and private individuals began the long process of bringing the incredible Giant Canada Goose back from its near extinction.

Our Iowa DNR began restocking a few suitable areas in 1964. The closest area to us that was initially restocked was Rice Lake near Lake Mills. Restocking was not an easy task, as Canada Geese almost always return to the same area where they were hatched.



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The success of the restocking efforts is plain to see. Even though our Canada Geese can sometimes be a nuisance, our world is blessed to have them.

OK, enough history lesson! Canada Geese are unmistakable. Their breasts are light colored and their backs are brown and of course, they have webbed feet.

Giant Canada Geese weigh from eleven to over twenty pounds, with the females usually smaller than the males. They are very long-lived birds, averaging from ten to twenty-four years in the wild. This of course is if they survive to adulthood. Many goslings don't make it that far.

Canadas mate for life and stay together year-round. They start choosing a mate when they are two to three years old, so don't breed until then. They will try to find a new mate if one of them dies.

Canada Geese are very gregarious birds, flocking together except when nesting. The pair will vigorously defend their nesting territory against all creatures (even people). Raised wings, extended neck and hissing will usually deter invaders, but the Geese aren't afraid to bite and beat their wings at anything that doesn't back off.

Nesting in our area begins in March and April. They have to start early, because after the goslings hatch, the adults molt their flight feathers and are grounded. Gosling are grown enough to fly at the same time the adults have regrown their own feathers.

Canada Geese are by nature migratory, and the young of the year will

stay with their parents until the following spring.

Obviously, however, not all Canadas migrate. They are very adaptable, and we have created some wonderful wintering spots for them. Why not stay and take advantage of water that's kept open, and grain and other food provided by humans?

I hope this newsletter has given you a renewed appreciation for "our" Giant Canada Geese. We came so close to losing them. Their beautiful V-shaped flights and honking overhead announce both spring and fall. Our world was a lesser place without them!

## JULY BIRD NOTES

Summer came so late this year and has flown by. Soon August will be here and the Orioles and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds will be coming back through on their way South. Be sure to have your feeders out again by the first of August if you put them away for the summer. They will often stay longer in the fall than they did in the spring!

Indian Meal Moths will once again be hatching. All of our feed is fumigated to prevent infestations. But, Indian Meal Moths are in all grain products (including dog and cat food) worldwide. Buy small quantities of birdseed this time of year and keep it in the freezer if at all possible. If you can't keep it in the freezer, it is best stored outside in a garage, rather than in your house, in a sealed container.

Enjoy your birds!

Ellen S. Montgomery

