

# LIVING with WILDLIFE

## Canada Geese



The range of Canada Geese is along both coasts and throughout central and lower United States.



**Branta canadensis**

### IDENTIFICATION

The Canada goose is one of the most widely distributed waterbirds in North America. Geese can range in size from 22 to 48 inches from beak to feet and can weigh from three to 24 pounds. Large geese can have a wing span of six feet. The most identifying mark on Canada geese is the white cheek patch. Male (**gander**) and female (**goose**) look similar, however, the male is slightly larger.

Canada geese are known for their V-shaped flying patterns and honking sound. The migratory (moving from one place to another) flight of these birds signals the beginning of fall.

Canada geese develop strong bonds with mates and are very protective of their family group. Families migrate together. They stay together in the winter and return to the same nesting area each year. **Yearlings** (one year old) join other yearlings and move to new areas. Young geese will not find mates and nest until they are three years old.

### HABITAT & HABITS

Canada geese build nests of twigs, grasses, bark, leaves and mosses on the ground near water. Five to six cream colored eggs are laid in March or later in cooler regions. Young geese, called **goslings**, weigh three to four ounces when they hatch. Within 24 hours they are swimming. Geese are **precocial** which means they are born with their eyes open, **down** covered and able to move about freely.

**Altricial** birds like robins are born helpless and need **parental** support.

Canada geese communicate by using body language and a variety of calls and honking sounds.

Canada geese are herbivores. They feed most often during early morning and late afternoon. They are **grazers** which means they eat grasses. They eat a variety of **terrestrial** plants. They also eat **aquatic** (water) plants — that is what they are doing when you see them with their heads down in the water.

*Airplane pilots have reported seeing Canada geese flying at 9,000 feet.*

# Living in Harmony, Living in Conflict

## Living in harmony . . .

Most of the time, Canada geese and humans live in harmony.

- Canada geese are popular waterfowl to hunt and provide a flavorful source of protein
- People enjoy watching geese in parks and refuges
- The song or honk of the Canada goose is heard during the annual fall and spring **migrations** of these birds.

## Living in conflict . . .

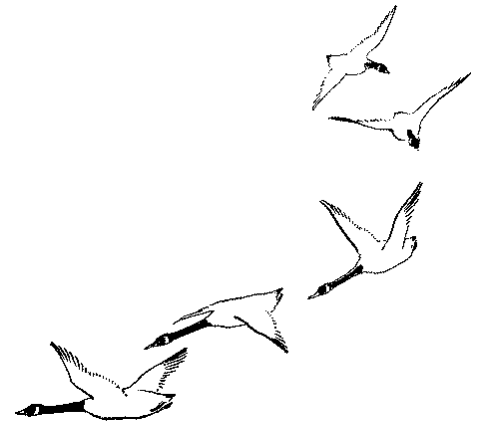
- Canada geese eat crops like wheat, corn, rice, turf grasses (grasses grown for lawns and golf courses) and alfalfa
- Canada geese can collide with aircraft causing fatal results
- Droppings from Canada geese can pollute municipal water supplies and cause health problems for humans and other animals on golf courses, in parks and residential areas
- Droppings from Canada geese can carry *E-coli* into swimming areas
- Canada geese can damage landscaping

## Preventing Damage Done by Canada Geese

Some methods to prevent damage done by Canada geese include:

- Stop feeding the geese!
- Prevent reproduction — this can be done by egg **adding** or shaking the eggs.
- Put up physical barriers like fencing. Geese will walk into an area and fencing will keep them out. Grid wires strung across ponds will keep geese from landing.
- Alter habitat - keep the environment unattractive to geese. Allow grass to grow. Geese like short grass where they can “look out” for predators.

- Harassment by:
  - using dogs to chase geese;
  - using specialized fireworks (pyrotechnics) shot out of a pistol to scare geese;
  - hanging mylar tape which is shiny on one side and colored on the other side, may temporarily keep geese away.
- Hunting — is the most efficient way to remove geese and make them wary.
- Repellents — The chemical methyl anthranilate, which historically has been used as the flavoring in grape soda, is now also used as a repellent for Canada geese on lawns and in small pools of water.



Geese do not like the irritation it causes in the oral and nasal cavities so they stay away from the treated areas

**Humans provide many excellent year-round habitats for Canada geese. This has resulted in populations of non-migrating Canada geese and these geese tend to cause the most problems because they have lost their wildness.**

# Economics of Damage

Between 1991 and 1997, 16,949 civilian aircraft-wildlife strikes were reported to the Federal Aviation Administration. This is less than 20% of the number of strikes that actually occurred. The Air Force reports it has 3,000 bird strikes each year. About 90% of the strikes on aircraft occur on or near airfields when aircraft are below 2,000 feet. Strikes at this altitude are dangerous because aircraft are close to the ground and flight crews are occupied with complex take-off or landing procedures.

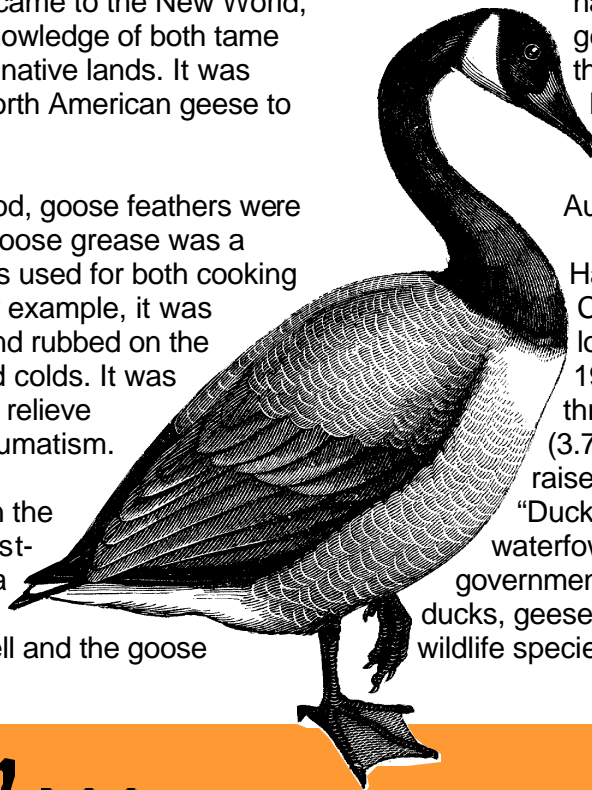
The most significant military aircraft disaster caused by birds occurred at Elmendorf Air Force Base on September 22, 1995. An E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft struck several Canada geese on take-off and crashed, killing 24 people. Gulls (32%), waterfowl (31%) and raptors (17%) have been increasing in numbers and are involved in 80% of the reported bird strikes where damage to airplanes occurred.

# History

When European settlers came to the New World, they brought with them knowledge of both tame and wild geese from their native lands. It was natural for them to add North American geese to their food supply.

In addition to providing food, goose feathers were used to make beds and goose grease was a valuable substance. It was used for both cooking and for medical uses. For example, it was blended with turpentine and rubbed on the chest to ease coughs and colds. It was also thought that it helped relieve earaches and soothe rheumatism.

Folklore tells us that when the meat on the goose's breastbone was thick, it meant a cold winter was on the way. The saying "All is well and the goose



hangs high," meant when the geese were flying high in the sky the weather would be good. The Native Americans thought that a harsh winter would be coming if the geese flew south in early August.

Habitat destruction reduced Canada goose populations to a low of a 1.1 million birds in the late 1940s. Today there are more than three times that number (3.7 million). Over \$250 million is raised each year from the sale of "Duck Stamps" (required for all waterfowl hunters) which are used by the government to buy wetland habitat for ducks, geese and hundreds of non-game wildlife species.

# Your turn . . .

## Our language . . .

has many words using the term goose. To goose someone means to poke them. Goose egg means a zero score. Make up a sentence showing the meaning of the following goose words or phrases.

goose neck:

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a wild goose chase:

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cooking someone's goose:

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**ACROSS:** 3. altricial, 5. yearlings, 6. gander, 7 turf grasses, 8. migrate, 10. grazers, 11. precocial, 12 down  
**DOWN:** 1. parental, 2. goslings 4. terrestrial, 9. aquatic

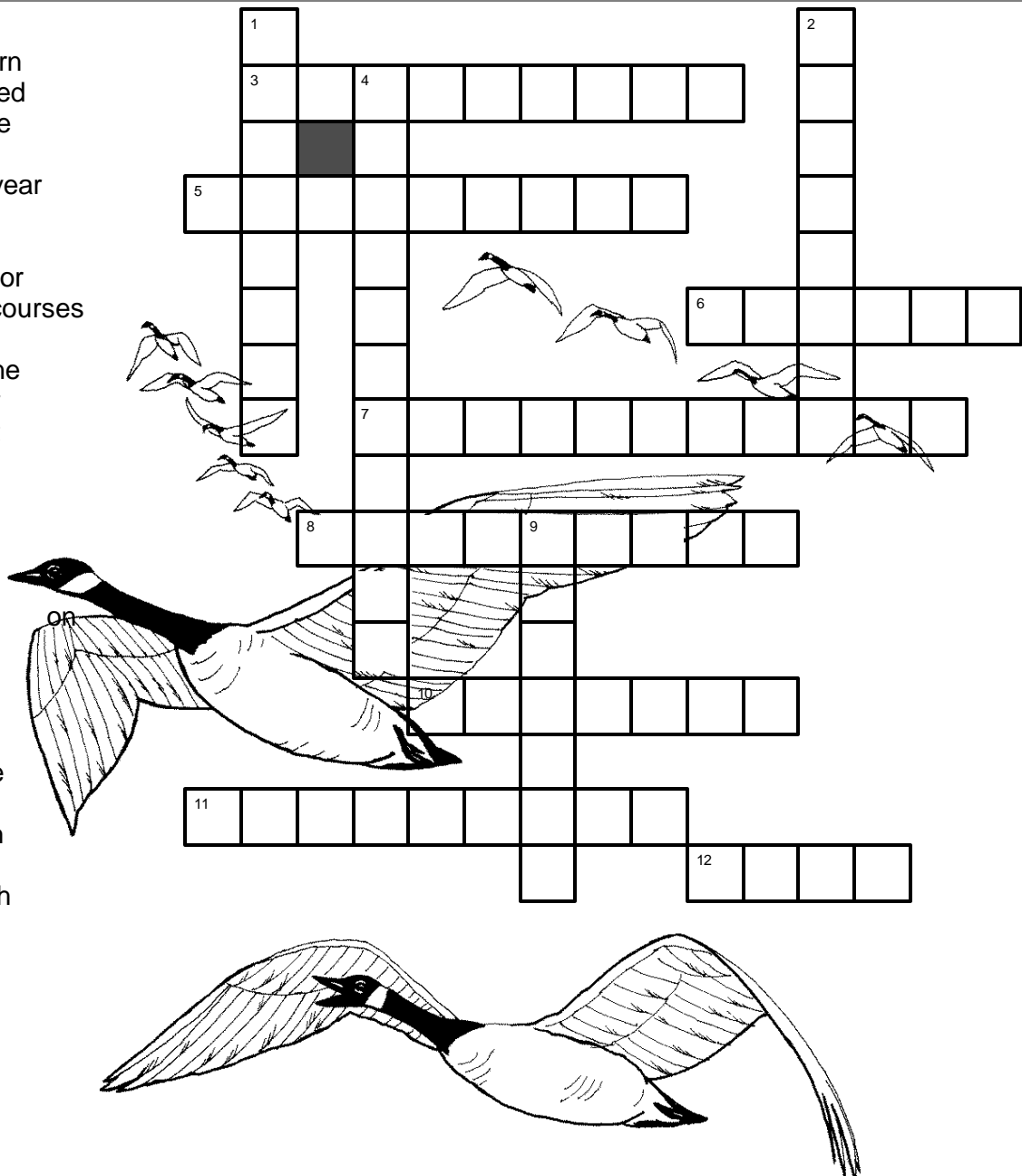
# CROSSWORD REVIEW

## ACROSS

3. Birds that are born helpless and need parental care are called this
5. Birds that are a year old
6. Male goose
7. Grasses grown for lawns and golf courses (two words)
8. To move from one place to another
10. Animals that eat grasses
11. Birds that are born with eyes open and able to move freely
12. Small feathers geese

## DOWN

1. Care by parents
2. Young geese are called this
4. Having to do with the ground
9. Having to do with water

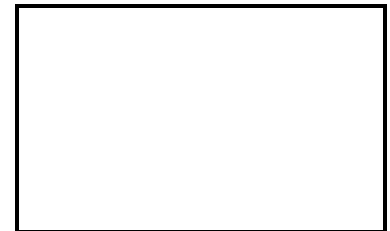


## Additional Resources

Wildlife Activity Book and  
1998 Wildlife Issue of the  
Colorado Reader  
Colorado Foundation for  
Agriculture  
P.O. Box 10  
Livermore, CO 80536

Prevention and Control of  
Wildlife Damage CD ROM  
or Handbook  
202 Natural Resource Hall  
University of Nebraska  
P.O. Box 83819  
Lincoln, NE 68583

Jack H. Berryman Institute  
for Wildlife Damage  
Management  
Utah State University  
Logan, Utah 83431-5210



*This activity sheet has been developed by USDA Wildlife Services. For more information about Canada geese contact your state's Wildlife Services office or USDA Wildlife Services at 301 734-7921.*