



## The Canada Goose

The following article is the first in a series from *Hinterland Who's Who*, by the Canadian Wildlife Service.

The appeal of the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) is legendary. The spectacle of the birds migrating in long, honking, irregular "V" formations across spring or autumn skies is one of the most dramatic portents of the change of seasons in Canada.

Few species of North American birds are so widely distributed over the continent, are composed of so many varieties or races, and provide so much opportunity to explore the mysteries of bird biology.

### Varieties and distribution

A Canada Goose can be recognized by its characteristic black head and crown, long black neck and whitish cheek patches. However, there are probably more than 20 subspecies of this bird, so a Canada Goose in one region may be quite a different bird from one in another.

Most of these races are surprisingly distinctive. They range in size from the large forms such as the deep-voiced honkers, to the small forms with high-pitched cackling voices. The weights vary from two-and-a-half to 18 pounds, their wingspreads from about three to six-and-a-half feet. They vary in colour from a light pearl-grey to a chestnut, and even a blackish brown.

### Breeding range

The breeding range of the Canada Goose extends in Canada from the Yukon east to Newfoundland, and from southern Victoria Island and southern Baffin Island to the U.S./Canada border in the west, and northern Ontario and Quebec in the east. They are not usually seen, except during migration, in southern Ontario and Quebec, nor in the three Maritime provinces. A few Canada Geese winter in southern Can-

ada, but most travel farther south, to refuges in the United States, or even to northeastern Mexico.

### Spring migration

The vast muskeg region of northern Ontario bordering the west coast of James Bay and the south coast of Hudson Bay is the magnet which draws the honkers northward each spring to nest. These geese reach their breeding grounds in late April, several weeks before the break-up of the major rivers. At this time there may still be several feet of snow in the bush.

While waiting for the snow and ice to clear from the interior muskeg where they will nest, the early arriving geese fly back and forth between open spots along the rivers. They feed in snow-free areas on sedges and berries remaining from the previous autumn.

The Canadas are hardy birds. Having put on a layer of fat during the early stages of migration they are easily able to sit out extended periods of severe weather. Even so, spring in the north is often capricious; late blizzards may force the advance flocks to retreat southward several times before they finally settle at their breeding grounds.

### Nesting

Usually five to seven eggs are laid, with older birds producing more eggs than birds nesting for the first time.

The female incubates the eggs for 28 days, while the male stands guard nearby. In the muskeg of northern Ontario, the male is sometimes several hundred yards or more from the nest. During the nesting period the female leaves the nest only briefly each day to feed.

Because geese do not breed until two years of age, alternate annual variations in the age structure of a population are normal. For example, a bumper crop of young in one year lowers the percentage of geese of breeding age in the population the following year. Two years later the addition of these geese to the breeding segment of the population results in another large crop of young.

### Late summer and autumn migration

Soon after the young have hatched, the families leave the nesting area. The adults are flightless at this time because they are moulting and regrowing their flight feathers.

A pair with their young of the year are an almost inseparable troupe, acting in unison almost as a single biological unit. The female leads the way, followed by the young, with the gander bringing up the rear. When another goose family ventures too close, "battle formation" is assumed, the male at the head of a V-like formation, ready to do battle while the female and young

