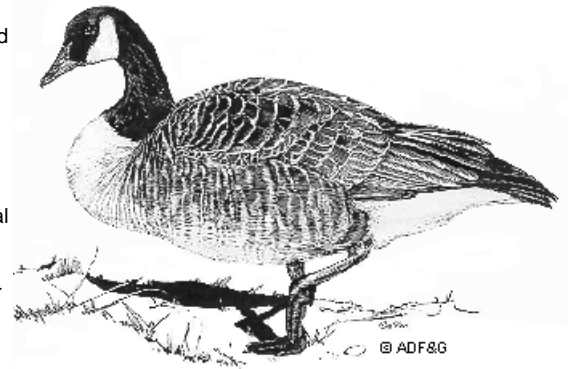


## Canada Geese

**Canada geese** (*Branta canadensis*) are the most familiar geese in Alaska and across North America. They are classified into over 15 subspecies varying in size and shading. All have a distinctive black head and neck with a white cheek patch; most have a full or partial white ring at the base of the neck, brownish wings, back and sides, white to grayish-brown breast and belly, white rump patch, and black legs and feet. Common characteristics of all geese include similar coloration of males and females, life-long pair bonds with mates (although those that lose mates will re-pair), first breeding at 2-3 years of age, well-adapted for walking on land, feed primarily by grazing on vegetation, and they are very social except during nesting. Pairs generally establish a nesting territory, produce four to five eggs per nest, and raise their young as a family unit. Later, families often combine to form "creches" guarded by several parents. As with most other waterfowl, geese are flightless for about a month in mid-summer, while new wing feathers are grown. Predators of Canada geese and their eggs vary widely among areas and include foxes, coyotes, wolves, bears, wolverines, gulls, eagles, and ravens. Canada geese are popular and accessible to many wildlife watchers, even in urban areas. They are prized by hunters across the continent.



Alaska has six subspecies of Canada geese—two small, two medium, and two large. **Cackling Canada geese** (*B.c. minima*) are the smallest subspecies, usually weighing 3 to 5 pounds (1.4-2.3 kg), and they have a distinctive high-pitched call. Cacklers nest only on the outer coast of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in western Alaska and winter primarily in California's Central Valley. In recent years, an increasing number of cacklers has wintered in western Oregon. Spring migration takes cacklers up the Pacific coast, with a stop in Cook Inlet marshes, through the Alaska Range to the nesting grounds. Fall migration includes staging on the upper Alaska Peninsula for several weeks, then a trans-oceanic flight to Oregon and California. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, overharvest and nest predation reduced the population from over 350,000 to about 30,000. Through a cooperative management effort among wildlife agencies and user groups from Alaska to California, cacklers rebounded to 160,000 by 1993 and are increasing.

**Aleutian Canada geese** (*B.c. leucopareia*) weigh 4 to 6 pounds (1.8-2.7 kg) and usually have a broader white ring at the base of their necks than other subspecies. These birds are seldom seen in Alaska outside of their Aleutian Islands breeding grounds. They probably follow a coastal migration route through remote areas of the state and across the Gulf of Alaska on their way to and from their wintering grounds in California's Central Valley. A small group of Aleutians nests on the Semidi Islands and winters near Pacific City, Oregon. Although they formerly nested throughout most of the Aleutian Islands, foxes introduced for fur farming between the 1750s and 1939 extirpated Aleutian Canadas from most islands. In 1967, there were fewer than 800 geese in the population and it was listed as an endangered species. An intensive rangewide recovery program and restocking of geese on fox-free islands has ensured their safety. In 1991, the growing population numbered over 7,000 and was downlisted to a threatened species. Most now nest on Buldir Island, with small numbers on Chagulak, Agattu, Nizki, and Kaliktagik islands.

**Taverner's** (*B.c. taverneri*) and **lesser Canada geese** (*B.c. parvipes*) are the two medium-sized subspecies that are very similar and may collectively be called "lessers." They differ only slightly in size and color (Taverneri are smaller and darker breasted). These two populations are the most widespread and abundant Canada goose subspecies in Alaska. Taverner's are geese of coastal tundra, nesting just inland of cackling Canadas on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and extending north to the Arctic Slope. Lesser Canadas (*parvipes*), related to larger subspecies to the east, nest in Cook Inlet and throughout river drainages between western and Interior Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Both subspecies winter primarily in Washington and Oregon. Taverner's Canadas gather at Izembek Lagoon near Cold Bay for a direct trans-Pacific flight. Parvipes take either the Gulf of Alaska coast south or follow interior paths up the Tanana River through British Columbia.

**Dusky Canada geese** (*B.c. occidentalis*) are the darkest colored Canada geese in Alaska. Dusxies average 6 to 8 pounds (2.7-3.6 kg), but males can weigh 10 pounds (4.5 kg) or more in spring. The population of dusky geese has always been small, with the shortest migration of all Canada geese in Alaska. They nest only on the Copper River Delta near Cordova. Most birds overwinter in the rich grassy fields of Oregon's Willamette Valley and along the Columbia River near Portland, but a few stay farther north in coastal areas of Washington and British Columbia. The great Alaska earthquake of 1964 produced an uplift and drying of their nesting grounds that initially helped dusxies increase to over 25,500 by 1979. However, long-term habitat changes favoring predators, such as brown bears and coyotes, have reduced dusky goose production, and the population has hovered between 10,000 and 18,000 since the 1980s.

The largest geese in Alaska, **Vancouver Canada geese** (*B.c. fulva*), weigh 6 to 10 pounds (2.7-4.5 kg) during the fall, but males can weigh 12 to 14 pounds (5.5-6.4 kg) in spring. These geese are found in Southeast Alaska and British Columbia where most remain year-round. Vancouver geese, unlike other Canadas, nest in coastal forests and winter along marine waters. The biology of these birds is not well known because they are more secretive, frequently building nests and rearing broods in old growth spruce and hemlock forests. Vancouvers sometimes nest in trees. Succulent plants, including skunk cabbage, are favored summer foods, but Vancouvers heavily rely on animal matter during the winter. Clams, salmon eggs, and even dead salmon are readily eaten!

For more information about geese, the reader is encouraged to review *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* (F.C. Bellrose, 1976, Stackpole Books) and the *Wildlife Notebook Series* entry on [Geese](#).

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