



HUNTING SNOWS in the SPRING





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The story of the remarkable growth in the snow goose* population is laced with irony—having reached record high numbers, the flock is now on the verge of disaster. The swollen ranks of snow geese exceed the

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capacity of their breeding grounds to support them. The skyrocketing counts mean that starvation, a dramatic drop in reproductive rates and the potential for the outbreak of disease are serious threats to the flock.

Consequently, in 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a spring light goose “conservation order.” The order allows hunting in the spring and relaxes the normal regulations on provisions such as the use of electronic calls, bag limits, shooting hours and shotgun plugs. Its goal is to protect the long-term welfare of the population by reducing its numbers to roughly 50 percent—a population level that scientists believe the breeding grounds can support.

Despite the importance of achieving this goal, the fundamental

principals of ethical behavior have not changed. While the conservation season encourages an increased harvest, it does not encourage unethical practices or wanton waste. Although snow goose numbers need to be reduced, hunters must continue to

harvest these migratory waterfowl in a respectful, lawful and ethical manner. This includes:

- ✓ Learning to distinguish between species in the air
- ✓ Being *certain* of the species being harvested
- ✓ Only shooting at birds that are within range
- ✓ Using the birds that are harvested
- ✓ Properly disposing of the remains from dressed birds



*FOOTNOTE: For the purposes of this publication, the term “snow goose” includes all geese that fall within the technical definition of light geese, i.e. the white and blue phase of the snow goose and the Ross goose.

This booklet is intended as a tool for hunters—the group that will play the major role in reducing the snow goose population. It contains the observations, comments and strategies compiled from wildlife specialists and hunters familiar with snow geese. Because the experience of hunting snows in the spring is relatively new, the knowledge base is also relatively small. For the spring hunting enthusiast, however, this fact is less of a limitation than an added attraction of the adventure.

BACKGROUND

The range of mid-continent snow geese extends from the tundra region of Canada to the gulf shores of Texas and Louisiana. The spring migration, however, funnels through a comparatively narrow strip of the Midwest, beginning in Texas and Louisiana and working its way north through Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky,



Tennessee, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, North and South Dakota.

Averaging five to six pounds and lacking natural camouflage, snow geese are extremely alert, wary and suspicious. These traits are magnified hundreds of times over by their habit of traveling in large flocks. Complicating the matter further for the waterfowler, many flocks contain birds that are eight to twelve years old, with some over 20 years in age. After experiencing hunters year after year, these mature geese have “seen it all,” making them doubly wary and advancing the snow goose’s reputation as the most challenging of all waterfowl to hunt.



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

When the spring migration occurs, tremendous numbers of snow geese will pass through the continent’s heartland in a matter of weeks. Snows migrate quickly, sometimes traveling hundreds of miles at a time. This means flocks are moving through an area in waves, often staying only a





day or two, and seldom more than a week. As a result, a willingness to travel, scout and communicate with other hunters is often crucial to finding geese. The following list offers some tips on locating geese and hunting locations:

- ✓ Locate the general area of goose concentrations and narrow the search as much as possible—which state, which county, which part of the county. This step can be simplified by taking advantage of the resources available from wildlife agencies within each state, including specific information sources such as web sites and snow goose hotlines.
- ✓ Locate feeding and roosting areas by fields, sloughs or lakes. This step will require scouting in the area.
- ✓ Locate landowners within your hunting area. Most landowners welcome courteous goose hunters in the spring and are able to give you current information as well as permission to hunt.
- ✓ Locate other hunters who are working your area. They are not your competition; they are your best allies. Sharing information

and possibly coordinating strategies will give you the best opportunity to connect with the highly mobile, unpredictable birds. For example, in past years hunters teamed-up by using Internet message boards to exchange up-to-date information on the location of geese. The snow goose tracking board at <http://www.waterfowler.com> was of particular value as local hunters updated it with observations recently gathered from the field. The new “Duck Watch” forum on the Ducks Unlimited Website at <http://www.ducks.org> will likely offer similar opportunities for the exchange of snow goose information.

WEATHER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Hunters accustomed to fall hunting and migrations that are pushed by northern cold fronts may need to adjust their thinking. Snow and cold winds from the north can stop a spring migration while warm southerly winds will encourage the geese to move.

Once geese have arrived at a location, regard gusty winds and fog

as favorable. Under these conditions, the geese are usually more active and fly lower. On bright, still, “bluebird” days, snow geese tend to loaf in one location, exhibit more caution and fly at greater heights.

TECHNIQUE COUNTS

PASS SHOOTING

Pass shooting is often the most time-efficient and least labor-intensive method of hunting.

- ✓ **Between Resting and Feeding Areas**—Tim Brown, a South Dakota hunter, says scouting is the key to successful pass shooting. He recommends locating both the flock’s roosting and feeding areas and then identifying the flight patterns as the geese move between them. Hunters can then position themselves between the resting flock and the previous day’s feeding area. He cautions that it’s important not to set up too close to

the roosting birds. If you do, one shot may put thousands of birds in the air, all heading in the opposite direction. Use wind to your advantage by setting up downwind from roosts, allowing it to muffle shots and carry the sound away from the birds. Additionally, the birds will usually fly lower when working against a headwind—the stronger the wind the better.



- ✓ **Between Large Flocks**—Watch for pass shooting opportunities when geese are moving back and forth between two large flocks. Under favorable weather conditions, this movement can occur throughout the day.

HUNTING OVER DECOYS

Opinions vary on the most effective approach to using decoys. Usually hunters will set large spreads numbering from three or four hundred, up





to massive sets of 2,000 or more. Other hunters favor smaller spreads of two or three dozen decoys, trading the attractiveness of large spreads for the ability to quickly pick up and move to a more favorable location.

- ✓ Here, as in pass shooting, scouting is critical to determine the location of geese. If they are feeding or roosting on private land, always ask for permission to hunt.
- ✓ Commonly, hunters who place hundreds of decoys will use lightweight rag and windsock styles of decoys, as well as white plastic bags and silhouettes, all of which allow a large set to be completed within a couple of hours. When wind is present, lightweight decoys have the added advantage of providing movement within the set, and there are hunters who say that decoy movement is vital to effectiveness.

- ✓ Some hunters have found that large numbers of widely-spaced decoys attract large flocks of geese, while smaller sets of tightly-placed decoys attract singles and pairs. Consider using both approaches by creating two spreads about 75 yards apart.
 - While individual decoys in large sets are often widely spread and randomly placed, setting the decoys in distinct groups of five to eight decoys, resembling family groups, may improve the set. Separate each group from the next by five to ten yards.
- ✓ Hunters employ several arrangements in their decoy spreads:
 - The fishhook spread points the shaft downwind. When this method is working, incoming geese follow the shaft in and land in the opening of the hook, which is where the blind is located.
 - The “U” or half-moon spread resembles a crescent, with the tips of the crescent pointing downwind. Approaching geese will be flying into the wind toward the center of the

- bend, which is where the blind should be.
- The teardrop decoy spread is wide at one end and narrow at the other with the blind in the center.
- Floating decoys can be used in typical water sets, or placed in shallow sheet water that has collected in a field that geese are using. Shell or silhouette decoys are also very effective in shallow water.
- A variety of “flying decoys” is frequently used by hunters. These decoys add realistic movement, increasing the attractiveness of the set.



- ✓ Courtesy Counts—First, be certain that your sneak will not ruin other hunter’s shooting opportunities.
- ✓ Low and Slow—The traditional approach involves crawling slowly and carefully on hands-and-knees using any cover available. Occasionally the goal may be to get within shooting range of the flock itself, but more often the sneak is used to get under the flight path of incoming and outgoing geese.
- ✓ Cow-boarding—This reportedly successful method involves using the plywood silhouette of a cow. The hunter holds the cow silhouette and slowly walks behind it toward the geese until he is within range. Game managers from Nebraska and North Dakota both relayed reports of successful stalks using a “cow-board.”

Avoid sneaking on flocks that are already being hunted by pass shooters or decoy hunters. Disturbing flocks that are being hunted by others will cause frustration and conflict.

THE SNEAK

Sometimes the only workable option to hunting a flock is to attempt to sneak up on the birds.





ELECTRONIC CALLS

The use of electronic calls is allowed during the spring conservation order. Often referred to as “e-calls,” electronic goose calls use high-volume speakers to broadcast the recorded sounds of large flocks of feeding snow geese. Their use can dramatically increase the chance of a successful hunt. A study at Louisiana State University demonstrated that electronic calls are over eight times more effective than mouth calls. While one electronic call is effective, two or more may be better.

Supplement the electronic calls with traditional mouth calls.



CAMOUFLAGE AND CONCEALMENT

Because snow geese tend to approach a decoy spread from a much greater altitude than ducks or dark geese, they have a broader view

of the spread, as well as more time to see anything that seems unnatural. It's worth the time and effort to make sure you are well concealed.



- ✓ When dressing in camouflage, don't forget to conceal your face.

Camouflage face netting is particularly important for hunters who wear glasses.

- Snow goose hunters frequently dress in white clothing. However, if the geese are flaring, lifting up or slipping off to the side before they are within range, try switching from white to traditional camouflage and moving 100 yards downwind of your decoys.
- Don't forget the obvious—movement is certain to flare already suspicious birds.

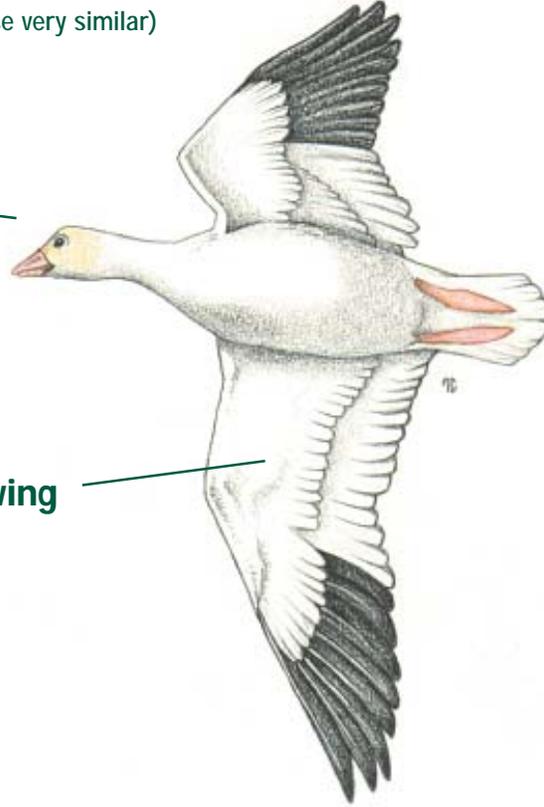
WHITE HEAD/WHITE UNDERWING SHOOT!

SNOW GOOSE

White Phase (Ross' Goose very similar)

All White Head

White Underwing

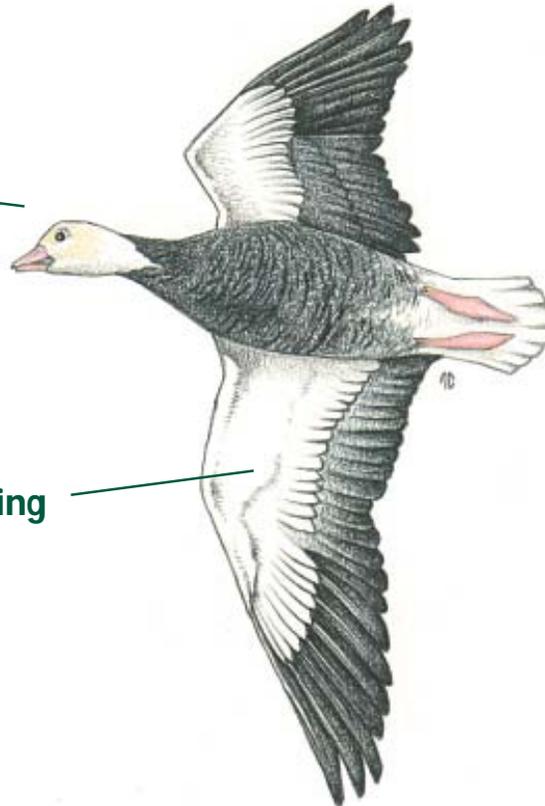


SNOW GOOSE

Dark Phase

All White Head

White Underwing



IDENTIFICATION

WHITE HEAD/WHITE UNDERWING

IDENTIFICATION

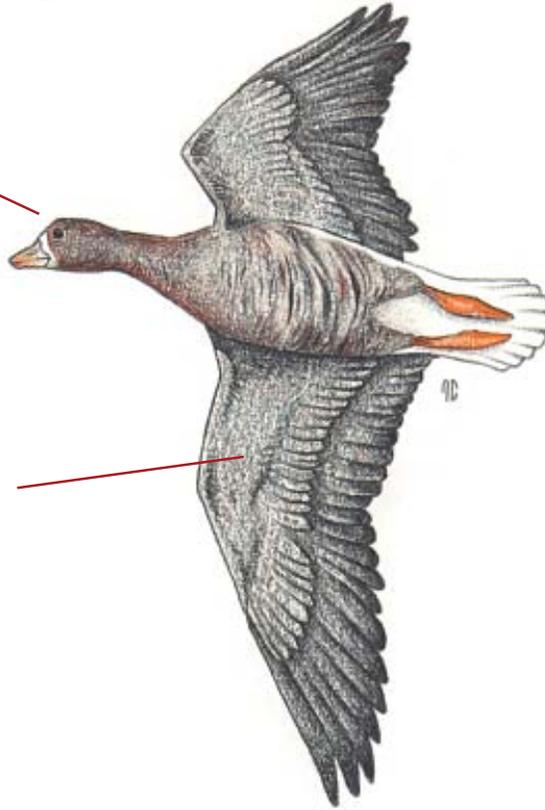
SHOOT!

DARK HEAD/DARK UNDERWING DON'T SHOOT!

WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

Dark Head

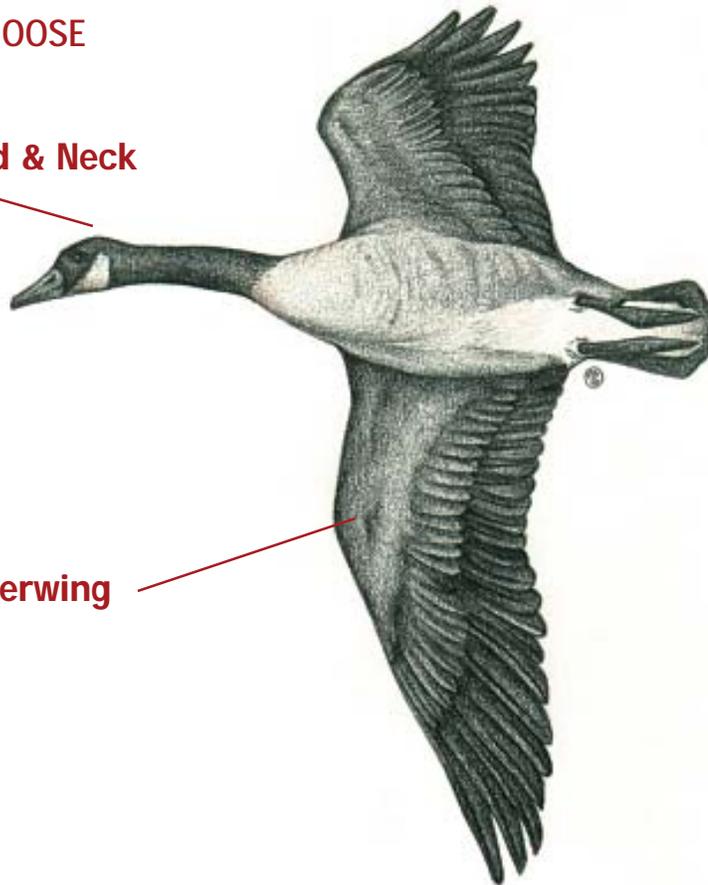
Dark Underwing



CANADIAN GOOSE

Dark Head & Neck

Dark Underwing



IDENTIFICATION

DON'T SHOOT!

IDENTIFICATION

DARK HEAD/DARK UNDERWING

FIELD CARE, PREPARATION AND RECIPES

When properly cared for and prepared, snow geese can offer excellent table fare.

CARE IN THE FIELD

- Avoid collecting warm birds in a pile. Spread the birds out to allow cooling air to circulate.
- Field dress the birds, removing the entrails and crop.
- Ensure that the birds are cool when stored and transported (40 degrees or less is recommended).

PREPARATION

- Gene Koupal, a hunter from South Dakota, recommends improving the taste of the meat by soaking it in a solution of water and salt or baking soda for 24 hours prior to

cooking. Use approximately one cup of salt or baking soda to two or three gallons of water.

- Jeff Gleason, an Ontario hunter, says when you have a large number of geese, the meat can be filleted from the birds and refrigerated or frozen. He also suggests having the goose meat ground into burger, adding 10-20% beef tallow. This is a great way to utilize a large number of geese while adding to your flexibility for creative cooking: soups, spaghetti, lasagna, etc. NOTE: Be sure that all shot is removed. Steel shot can seriously damage a grinder.
- Pat Kehoe, from Alberta, suggests breasting out geese that have low body fat, excessive pin feathers or shot damage. In Pat's experience, lean birds are stronger tasting when roasted, and because of this are better skinned, breasted and used in alternate recipes.





RECIPES

BARBECUE STUFFED SNOW GOOSE BREAST

Pat Kehoe, Brooks, Alberta

8 snow goose breast fillets	5 slices bacon, diced
2 stalks celery	1 medium red onion, chopped
1 green pepper, chopped	¼ red pepper, chopped
½ cup cheddar cheese, shredded	½ cup mozzarella cheese, shredded
¼ cup steak sauce	

Fry bacon over medium heat until fat becomes translucent.

Add chopped vegetables to frying pan and cook until slightly softened, keeping heat at medium.

Add the steak sauce and simmer for an additional 5 minutes. Remove mixture from pan and cool. When sufficiently cool, so that cheese won't melt, add the cheese.

Slice each breast along one side to create a pocket.

Now stuff the goose pockets with the cheese and vegetable mixture.

Seal opening with toothpicks.

SKEWERED SNOW GOOSE

Bill Lenhart, Bethany, Missouri

4 snow geese, filleted, cut into 1" cubes	1 large jar Italian salad dressing
8 slices bacon, cut in thirds	Worcestershire sauce
liquid Barbecue Smoke	Seasoning salt

Marinate goose pieces in a mixture of Italian dressing, liquid smoke and Worcestershire sauce for 24 hours in a covered bowl in refrigerator.

Drain marinade and sprinkle all pieces with seasoning salt.

Wrap each fillet piece with a bacon piece and secure with a toothpick or skewer pin. Cook on barbecue grill for about 30 minutes (until bacon is cooked).

Bill suggests using barbecue sauce, cocktail sauce or horseradish for dips.

PHOTO CREDITS:

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