

Pest Management

Snow geese: To fear or not to fear?

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The jet black necks, white cheek-patches and resonant honking calls of Canada geese are all too familiar to every building manager and groundskeeper in the Chicagoland area. Recently, these clear, deep honks have occasionally been accompanied by the high pitched yelping calls of a new version of geese: snow geese. Actually, snow geese are not new or rare, but we don't often see them on the ground in Chicago. They generally pass high overhead unbeknownst to us during migration. Small groups of snow geese have been spotted sporadically throughout the area in the past, but these sightings have become more common, and the size of the groups seems to be increasing. Fortunately for us, the groups of 25 and 30 snow geese that we are starting to see with some regularity are still but a fraction of the size of the typical snow geese flocks that invade the east coast as during migration, as well as the fields of the western Midwest.



Snow geese in flight.

Taxonomically speaking, snow geese and Canada geese share the same family name, *Anatidae*, but differ at the genus level. While they differ greatly in appearance, snow geese do, however, share many biological and lifecycle characteristics of migratory Canada geese. There are only two subspecies of snow geese, the greater snow goose, found wintering in huge numbers along the eastern coast of the U.S., and the lesser snow goose, that is popping up in Chicagoland and which we will refer to in the

following paragraphs. Snow geese are significantly smaller than the races of Canada geese found in the Midwestern U.S., and tend to travel in much larger, and noisier, flocks. A large flock of snow geese can be heard a couple miles away! Lesser snow geese come in two plumage varieties: blue-phase, having a bluish body coloration with white head and neck, and white phase, which have a dazzling, white coloration— from which the name “snow geese” arises— and starkly contrasting black wing tips. The coloration is the only difference between the two phases, and both can be found in the same flock.



Canada geese will flock with the smaller, white, snow geese.

Snow geese are entirely migratory, breeding in arctic and subarctic Canada, and wintering along the gulf coast of the U.S. Like Canada geese, lesser snow geese have experienced a huge population explosion. In the last 30 years, it has increased from 2 million individuals to over 5 million. Also similar to Canada geese, they are a very hardy and adaptable species. Shortly after hatching, goslings can follow adults up to 50 miles on foot to find food! They feed primarily on plant matter such as grass, wetland vegetation, and crops, and just like our Canada geese, they eat a lot! Even in nutrient-rich wintering grounds, marsh plants can take years to recover from a large flock's feeding habits. In the salt marsh habitat of their Canadian breeding and summering grounds, snow geese are being blamed for the decline of other bird species such as American wigeons and northern shovelers. Studies have shown that in some areas, over 60% of the salt marsh vegetation crucial to many bird populations has been destroyed or severely damaged. Much of this destruction is blamed on the enormous snow geese flocks, which can number in the thousands, and their voracious appetites.

While in northern Illinois we may have our hands full with managing Canada geese, just imagine the challenges that would arise with large congregations of hungry snow geese! For now, we need not worry about the brilliantly white birds. They can even be considered an enjoyable sight in groups of 30 or so. Let's just hope it stays that way!