

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*



Folk Name: Honker, Wild Goose, Common Wild Goose

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Lakes, ponds, turf grass

The Canada Goose is perhaps the best known of our local waterfowl. Everyone is familiar with this large goose with its long neck, black-and-white head, and loud honking call. Most have seen the typical V-formations Canada Geese make in migration. This goose was a favored prey of American Indians and European settlers. In his journal *A New Voyage to Carolina*, John Lawson recorded this entry on January 31, 1701: “On Saturday the Indians brought in some Swans and Geese, which we had our share of.”

The movement of Canada Geese through the Central Carolinas each spring and fall was a phenological phenomenon of great interest in the 1800s. Scores of notices were published each year in local newspapers announcing the arrival or departure of wild geese. Many local residents made weather predictions about long winters or early springs based on the movements of these goose flocks, and many notices were published about the success of local goose hunters or damage to crops. Some examples are provided below:

“Wild geese are playing mischief with wheat fields in Steel Creek township. A field of Hon. S.W. Reid was eaten bare as sheep would have nibbled it. It is said in ‘old times’ wild geese were so abundant in this region a man might ‘raise’ several thousand at a single shot! Fact!” —Charlotte, March 22, 1875

“The Yadkin river bottoms are alive with wild geese. They alight by the hundreds in the wheat fields and are so destructive that the farmers are resorting to every means in their power to destroy or drive them away. Numbers are shot daily.”
—Rowan County, December 17, 1877

“A gang of twelve wild geese were observed flying over the city yesterday morning, in a northerly direction. They were not more than 100 yards high and their ‘honk’ was distinctively heard.” —Charlotte, October 25, 1882

“Mr W E Sledge who was in the city yesterday, reports that the people in the vicinity of the Rock Island factory, on the Catawba River, are having a big time killing wild geese. The river for a mile above and below the factory, has been thronged for several days past by flocks of wild geese and numbers of them have been killed. The sport is



said to be exceptionally fine. The presence of wild geese in such numbers on the waters in this section of the country is something unusual and the oldest inhabitant fails to remember anything like it. The geese are hard to approach and the best success at killing them has been made by sportsmen in ambush, who would fire down into the flocks as they passed up and down the river.”
—Mecklenburg–Gaston County, March 1, 1883

“Wild geese and ducks are said to be plentiful on the river. This indicates an early cold snap.”
—Anson County, October 25, 1883

“For several days past large flocks of wild geese have been observed flying over the city. The course of their flight has been from southwest to northeast. They fly pretty low, and an occasional shot is had at them. Esquire Hood, of this county, fired into a flying drove and brought down a fine large, wild gander.”
—Charlotte, January 25, 1887

“A flock of wild geese were seen flying southward over Charlotte this morning. Those who saw them say that the skies were black with them.”
—Charlotte, December 2, 1897

“A flock of wild geese, about twenty in number, passed over the town Tuesday morning, flying very high and heading towards the northwest. Their coming is generally taken as the approach of spring.”
—Newton, February 28, 1890

“A few flocks of wild geese passed here recently. One drove lit in a field near John Boltons. He went to hunt for them, but they had keen eyes, and left Mr. Bolton looking on as they disappeared.”
—Concord, November 7, 1895

“Mr. Brant Culp killed two wild geese at one shot at the river a day or two ago. A few days ago a drove of fifteen or eighteen geese came over Bilesville. Just as they came over several blasts were made at the river, and several shot guns were discharged here. It sounded much like war time. The geese passed on.”

—New London—Stanly County, November 7, 1888

“Capt. Geo. Shannonhouse, who made his regular trip up yesterday on the Carolina Central, says he saw plenty of wild geese on the Pee Dee. He was only about 300 yards from there, but he might as well have been a mile.

‘Johnnie didn’t have his gun.’”

—Anson County, November 24, 1895

“The wild geese are flying toward the north. Winter’s back is broken and it will have to retire to the hospital for repairs.” —Hickory, March 12, 1891

In 1903, local historian Dr. J.B. Alexander shared his memories of geese around Charlotte:

It is but seldom wild geese were seen, save along the larger water courses. Here they were very destructive on wheat fields. They flew in pretty large droves in a northwest course, in the fall of the year, always keeping in a V shape, with the apex in front, giving a queer sound like “hank, hank, hank,” that could be heard a half mile. I have heard them “hanking” as they would fly over in the night. I have seen as many as fifty in a flock, from down to half a dozen. They were generally very fat and were much prized for the table. I have not seen or heard a flock passing in twenty years, but they still frequent the wheat fields along the rivers in small droves.

Many Carolina residents might be surprised to learn that the Canada Goose is not a native breeding bird in this region. Historically, it was only a visitor here. Each fall,



Canada Goose on nest in Mecklenburg County.
(Jeff Lemons)

tens of thousands of geese would fly south to spend the winter with most foraging in beds of eelgrass (*Vallisneria* sp.) along the North Carolina coast. Most would arrive in October and the largest flights often coincided with a full moon. The geese would return north by February or March. Only small numbers of geese were found inland in the winter months. The highlight of the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count conducted on December 26, 1953, was: “A single Canada Goose...not on previous counts in essentially the same area.” A Canada Goose was not recorded on another Charlotte Christmas Bird Count until 13 years later. On December 31, 1966, the count compiler remarked: “The 21 Canada Geese were a good find for this area.” Canada Geese have been recorded on this winter count every year since. The construction of dams and the creation of large inland lakes in the early twentieth century resulted in an increase of inland sightings, but Canada Geese did not remain in the Carolinas during the breeding season.

As early as the 1930s, private landowners attempted to establish resident populations of Canada Geese on small ponds in the Carolinas. Some of these attempts were successful and over the next few decades, sporadic nesting of Canada Geese was documented in a few scattered sites in both states. In 1944, 50 geese were nesting at a pond in Surry County, about 70 miles north of Charlotte. A pair of Canada Geese with four goslings was documented in Spartanburg, SC, in May 1949. Soon after, successful nesting was documented at Gaddy’s Goose Refuge in Anson County. In June 1962, a pair of Canada Geese was confirmed nesting in Mecklenburg County. A photograph taken by J.W. Whiteside of Charlotte was published in the September 1962 issue of *Wildlife in North Carolina*. It included this note: “Dear Sirs: Thought your readers might be interested in this photo. At the time other Canadian [*sic*] geese were heading north to raise their young, this pair chose a Mecklenburg County farm pond. Both birds fly well. Their five eggs were laid and hatched in June.”



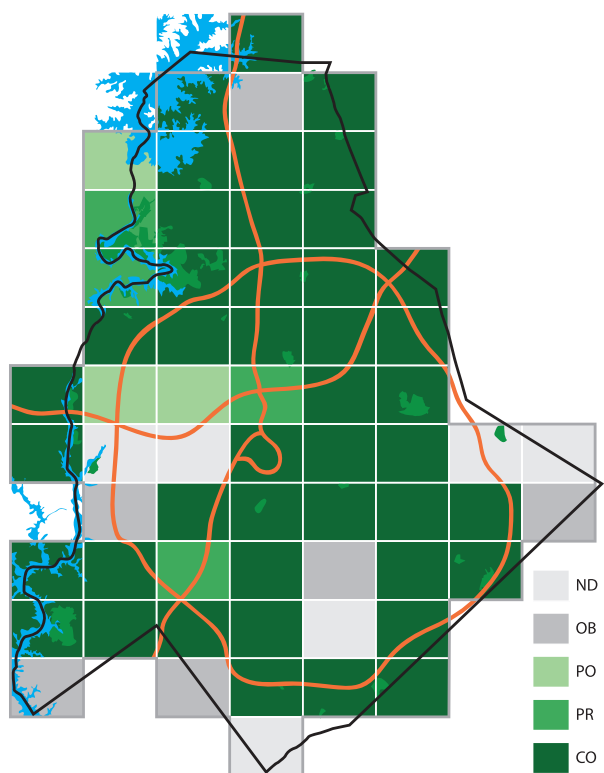
Canada Geese at McAlpine Creek Greenway with young.
(Gary P. Carter)

Local nesting expanded slowly during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Bill and Flo Cobey spotted a group of Canada Geese feeding in the fields near Creech's Pond in York County each summer from 1966 to 1968. On May 6, 1972, Mecklenburg Spring Bird Count observers recorded an adult "with two small goslings" and two years later, four adults and seven young were documented on the Spring Bird Count in 1974. By the 1980s, Canada Geese were year-round residents and the local nesting population was growing.

In 1983, biologists with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission implemented a Canada Goose stocking program designed to establish flocks of resident geese to provide increased opportunities for hunting. One of the only sites they stocked west of Interstate I-95 was Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge. At this same time, resident geese expanded into North Carolina from breeding stock introduced in South Carolina and Virginia. Today, feral populations of Canada Geese breed throughout both Carolinas. Estimates of the resident Canada Goose population in the United States grew from 2.5 million in 1990 to more than 5 million birds in 2011. In 2010, the population in North Carolina was estimated to be 111,000 adults. In many areas, they have become so numerous they are considered a nuisance animal.

Population estimates of resident geese in Mecklenburg County reached a high count of around 6,000 birds in 1998. These geese were causing damage and degrading lawns at parks, malls, HOA common areas, golf courses, schools, and other public and private facilities. Control and cleanup costs were estimated in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. A public outcry resulted in the capture of nuisance geese, egg addling, and the implementation of a wide variety of other goose control measures from flashing lasers to the use of border collies. At the height of the problem, Mecklenburg County park staff corralled hundreds of geese at Charlotte's Freedom Park while their flight feathers were in molt, loaded them on a truck, and drove them nonstop to a state wildlife refuge in Mississippi. Mississippi, the last state in the Union that accepted relocated geese, wisely ended their relocation program the following year.

Widespread problems caused by large populations of non-native, resident geese have resulted in the relaxation of federal regulations on goose control. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented a new policy that allows landowners to register online to receive a "depredation order" which allows them to "destroy resident Canada goose nests and eggs on property under their jurisdiction when necessary to resolve or prevent injury to people, property, agricultural crops, or other interests." Many landowners have taken advantage of the use of depredation orders. Recent estimates by the North Carolina Wildlife Commission indicate the Mecklenburg County resident goose population has been reduced to about 1,000 birds.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/4, CO/43)