

Love Me Or Hate Me: The Canada Goose and Its Changing Migration Patterns

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I know many people who love Canada geese, whether it is to watch them during flight or just because they see a goose as a future meal. I also know people who hate this bird because its droppings make a mess of lawns and parks. I find myself in this latter category. One thing that cannot be debated is that climate change is having an effect on the migration patterns of this bird. To be more specific, climate change is affecting the bird's migration dates in the fall and spring, its staging areas, and also its breeding areas. If the temperature continues to increase there is a chance that we may be seeing these birds in our area year-round!

Fall migration of Canada geese from northern Canada usually starts in mid-August, right after the geese shed their feathers and grow new ones in a process called molting, and it runs through November. This is the time when water begins to freeze over in the north and harvesting of crops occurs. This causes a decrease in food availability because the geese feed on plants found in shallow water and the berries and grains in the surrounding area. This decrease in food availability forces them to migrate south in order to find enough food to survive. Now, due to climate change, fall migration is occurring later in the year. Geese are no longer migrating in mid-August, but they are migrating more from mid- to late-September through December. This can be attributed to the fact that water is not freezing over until later in the fall and food is still readily available. This means that there is not as much pressure for them to migrate south in order to get food.

Migration later in the fall is also going to impact the hunting season. The current hunting dates in Ontario County are from September 1st to the 25th, October 22nd to November 20th, and December 26th to January 9th. If the temperature continues to increase and the Canada goose migration continues to migrate later in the year, New York State might have to change the dates of goose hunting to later in the year. If the state does not change these dates then the avid hunters in the area, like I know that some of you are, will not be pleased with the number of geese that they are going to see on the dinner table. Thus a change in hunting dates is necessary to ensure that the hunting output stays the same for all of you hunters out there.

In the spring geese return back north to breed. Contrary to popular belief, these birds are quite smart! The flyways used in the spring are the same or very similar to the ones that they use in the fall, the only exception is that instead of flying south they are flying north. This is also true for the area that they return to in the north. This area is the same as the previous year, or at least very close to it. Spring migration occurs from February through May. Due to climate change this is

also being pushed later in the year. In recent studies it has been seen that there is a direct relationship between the increase in temperature and the later arrival date of the geese in the north.

In the time period between fall and spring migration the geese stay in an area called a wintering area. This area is near water and usually in an open field. You hunters should be quite familiar with this territory as this is usually the type of spot you like to set up for a successful day of hunting. These areas have a high availability of food, but are not used as breeding areas. Due to climate change and the increase in temperatures, geese are not migrating as far south as they have in the past. In fact, geese are staying in a smaller geographic area than they have in the past. This means that they are staying closer to their breeding area, which is likely to be further north. Geese are not under as much pressure to migrate as far south in order to gather food and resources because the water is not freezing over as much as in the past. The breeding areas are moving further north as well. So overall, the geese are migrating within a smaller geographic reason due to the fact that they are not under as much pressure to migrate as far south in the winter. This means that there is a possibility that we may be seeing these birds year-round in this area. So for you hunters this might not be such a bad thing, and for all you geese haters maybe it is time to start thinking about the environment!

Now that you have seen the effects of climate change on the geese I am sure that many of you goose-haters out there are starting to think about returning that new gas guzzling Ford truck and getting a new gas efficient hybrid car! On the other hand you hunters are going to be hoping these temperature increases continue and eventually the geese will be here year-round. In order to prevent these changes, as well as changes in many other species, we must stop climate change right now, and these changes start with you and me. Let's make a difference and change the future of these species!