

Snow Goose Migration

By Michael McGuire

Witnessing snow goose migration for the first time is a unique experience, truly an awesome event of nature and we are fortunate to be its path. The loud simultaneous honking and circular flight by thousands of geese is sometimes referred to as a “tornado”.

Almost all snow geese in our area are part of a specific subspecies, referred to as greater snow geese, compared to lesser snow geese, common in most other regions of North America. Greater snow geese winter along the Mid-Atlantic coast, migrating about 3,000 miles to their arctic breeding grounds in far northeastern Canada and Greenland. Geese generally migrate in large flocks, often several thousand, taking off and landing together, often circling an area several times before landing to feed in fields or roost on water. They follow the same annual migration routes, using the same stopover locations, sometimes remaining for weeks before moving on. One popular and dependable stopover is Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area in Lancaster County. However, you don’t need to travel to see snow geese.

Locally, snow geese can be seen by the thousands during spring migration, often flying along the Susquehanna river, descending to eat leftover corn and grain in fields. In recent years, peak migration has been from mid-February to mid-March. Warmer weather, open water, and strong south winds typically encourage migration while north winds and colder weather slow migration, encouraging geese to stay before continuing. Smaller numbers of snow geese are around during fall migration and increasingly, even in winter.

Snow geese have two distinct morphs or varieties. Light morphs are white with black wing tips while blue morphs are dark gray or black with white heads. Greater snow geese are larger and mostly light morph. However, there are usually small numbers of blue morphs and even a few lesser snow geese in large flocks.

There is a reason people are noticing more snow geese and not just from more awareness. The population has rapidly grown over the last few decades, resulting in overpopulation, damaging their fragile tundra breeding habitat. This is one reason hunting seasons have been extended in many places, including Pennsylvania. Recent estimates are near one million greater snow geese and ten million lesser snow geese, down slightly from records a few years ago. Changes in winter habitat and migration patterns are thought to have caused this rapid growth. More available leftover grain in fields encourages slower sequential migrations, allowing more geese to survive.

If you are lucky and observant, you may see some geese with yellow neck collars, containing identifying letters and numbers. After finding and reporting the goose “17CP”, I could see previous observations. The goose was originally banded at Île-aux-Oies, Québec, Canada in May 2019 as part of an ongoing monitoring program at University of Laval and later observed November 2020, once in Victoriaville and few days later in Drummondville, both in Québec, before my observation in East Lewisburg in March 2021. When you see a flock of snow geese you can be certain this means you are sharing a moment of its impressive 3,000 mile journey.

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