

# Wild SIDE Canada goose

By **LYNETTE RAE McADAMS**  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Easily the most recognized waterfowl in North America, the Canada goose can be found in almost every wet environment on the continent, from the melted summer tundra of the Arctic

north, to the warm Gulf Coast waters of the deep south.

Distinguished by its large size and obvious markings, this handsome bird weighs in at almost 15 pounds and boasts a wingspan of nearly 6 feet.

Its bill, head and elongated neck are all solid coal-black, with a signature chinstrap

running cheek to cheek in a wide shock of bright white. The body of the goose is colored in soft browns and dusty grays, with creamier down feathers on the breast and underside, and darker, more pronounced brown flight feathers on the wings.

In the language of science, the species name, *Branta canadensis*, means “burnt goose out of Canada,” and perfectly describes this group of birds comprising seven sub-species, six of which make stop-overs or live year-round along the southwest Washington and north Oregon coasts. Though each one varies slightly, the differences center mostly on size, and only a trained eye can pick them out easily.

Canada geese mate for life and return each year to the place where they were born to breed and nest. Baby geese, called goslings, take their first swim less than 24 hours after they hatch and, only one day later, will be able to dive 30 to 40 feet underwater. With flight lessons beginning between two and three months



LYNETTE RAE McADAMS PHOTO

## Canada geese

of age, young geese prepare all summer to follow their parents on their first migration, which usually takes place when they're only about six months old.

A famous announcement for the changing of the seasons, migrations occur twice each year — in the spring and fall — and are an impressive feat of biologic engineering. In advance of the great flight, the goose's body alters its chemical state, producing extra thyroid hormones to suddenly increase muscle mass and help cope with the physical stress of the voyage.

Flying at an altitude of about 3,000 feet, some Canada geese make migrations as long

as 3,000 miles and can travel 1,500 miles in one day. Aligning themselves in a V-formation during flight, they use a technique called “drafting” whereby the lead goose breaks the headwind, giving the geese behind it a much easier ride. Because the lead position expends so much energy, the goose trade off, with the lead goose falling to the rear whenever it tires, and each goose taking a turn up front.

The largest goose in the world and one of the most hunted, the Canada was thought to be nearly extinct until the mid 1960s. Little more than half a century later, the population has increased so much that many urbanized

flocks, now dependent on human interactions for food, are considered pests.

Generally, a group of geese is called a “flock,” but a group of geese in flight is a “skein,” and geese on the ground may be referred to as a “gaggle,” a “herd” or a “corps.”

In 2009, a US Airways flight collided with a skein of migrating Canada geese, causing complete loss of power and forcing the pilot to make an emergency landing in New York's Hudson River. Amazingly, all members of the flight survived, and the story was later memorialized in the 2016 film “Sully,” with Tom Hanks in the starring role. 

## Crossword Answer

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