

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

3 Canada Goose *Anser canadensis* Vieillot

Now known as *Branta canadensis* (Linnaeus)

(PLATE CCI)

This lively composition was based on a watercolor completed by Audubon in February, 1833, though it incorporates an earlier study for the male bird by itself made some twelve years previously. The 'Canada Goose' became the initial plate for the third of the four volumes of *Birds of America*, and thus stands almost half way through the total number published.

By the time this and the other later plates were being issued (including the 'Great White Heron'), Audubon's descriptions in his *Ornithological Biography* were tending to become less anecdotal and very much more technical than in his earlier essays. For the 'Canada Goose', for instance, the only general information he imparts is that the male bird here depicted was presented to him 'by Dr. T. M. Brewer of Boston'. Then follow three pages packed exclusively with anatomical detail: 'The duodenum curves at the distance of 8 inches, and there are formed 12 folds by the intestine, which is ten feet in length...'. Unfortunately he offers documentation neither of habit nor habitat. So, despite Audubon's customary dramatic presentation of his subject in the print, the ingenuous enthusiasm that so enlivened his former literary portrayals of birds is in this case lacking.

Nevertheless, the Canada Goose is a highly significant bird, especially in the skies of northern North America where V-shaped formations of honking geese are perhaps the most eloquent signs of the return of spring.

Most widespread and familiar of North American geese, this species is often held in captivity, while escaped birds have colonized areas even in parts of Europe. The black-stocked head and neck with its conspicuous white patch is diagnostic for the species. Except for size (males are somewhat larger) the sexes are alike. Paired birds tend to remain mated until one dies, and they stay together even in the large winter flocks. There is much variation geographically in the size of these geese, for the largest subspecies averages three times the weight of the smallest.

The Canada Goose nests rather early, often before the snow has melted in the north. Pairs select a site under a bush, on a bank, or preferably on an island in a pond or lake or marsh, where a nest made of leaves and grass is lined with down to receive the three to seven eggs laid by the female. While she incubates the eggs, the male swims or strides nearby, always on guard as Audubon shows him so vividly in this engraving. Both adults vigorously defend the nest, driving off potential predators, including humans.

The eggs hatch in twenty-four to twenty-eight days, and the downy young soon follow the parents to the nearest water. They feed in the water on various sedges and other plants, or graze in grassy areas. Later in the year they eat fallen grain in stubble fields. As the young reach adulthood and can fly well, the family joins other groups of geese, and flocks begin to form. They seldom breed until they are two or more years of age.

Each population has its traditional migratory pathways and wintering grounds, and some even have special areas where they retire to molt, remaining flightless for a month. In the north-eastern United States there exists a new, suburban adapted population built up from feral and captive Canada Geese of several subspecies—though the subspecies that once inhabited the region at the time of European colonization was regrettably wiped out by the early settlers.