



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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UNKNOWN DISEASE KILLS 750 GEESE IN NO. CAROLINA; SCIENTISTS SEEK CAUSE

A mysterious disease killed about 750 Canada geese, wintering on the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, Dare County, N. C., during March, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service disclosed today.

Government scientists are now seeking the organism which caused the disease. The Service ruled out the possibility of starvation as the cause, after intensive research had revealed ample food on Pea Island to prevent the geese from starving to death.

Many of the geese were recovered before death in an emaciated, flightless condition. Twelve of these specimens were flown to the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Animal Industry laboratory, Beltsville, Md., where a blood parasite, leucocytozoa, was discovered in five of the birds.

This parasite is common to domestic poultry, but scientists do not know what effect it has on Canada geese. They believe that black flies on the Canadian breeding ground transmit the organism to the wild geese.

The fact that the parasite was found in five of the diseased birds is not sufficient evidence that the leucocytozoa caused the death of the 750 Canada geese on Pea Island, according to Marion Farr, Agriculture Department parasitologist. Miss Farr, who visited the island last week to collect additional specimens, is conducting the investigations.

The mysterious disease hits the geese wintering on North Carolina's coastal region almost every year. Four serious outbreaks have been reported in the past two decades, but this year's epidemic on the Pea Island Refuge is the worst on record.

Fifteen thousand Canada geese were estimated on the Pea Island Refuge during the peak of the past winter. Established in 1938, the 5,880-acre refuge is part of the long barrier reef lying east of North Carolina's coast, and separates Pamlico Sound from the Atlantic Ocean. Its long, sandy stretches and fresh-water pools are also used as wintering grounds by thousands of greater snow geese, American brant and redhead ducks, and as nesting grounds by black ducks, shorebirds, gulls, and terns.

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