

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release September 24, 1975

McGarvey 202/343-5634

ATLANTIC BRANT HUNTING REOPENED

Atlantic brant, small dark geese which spend nearly all their lives on the sea, have bounced back from a low of 40,000 in 1973 to an estimated population this year of 150,000--allowing the reopening of hunting along the east coast this fall.

The season for brant will be short--30 days, opening no earlier than November 10--and a 48-hour emergency closure provision in the regulations calls for a last minute population count of the birds on their wintering grounds before the November 10 season opening to make sure population estimates that were the basis for the reopening of hunting were accurate. The Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service says that if the number of brant is significantly lower than anticipated, or if food supply is limited on the wintering grounds the season will be reduced or closed altogether, depending on the severity of the situation.

The gregarious Atlantic brant is tied inextricably to the salt water environment. Except during migration, they rarely fly over land. They waddle onto tidal flats at low tide, preen on the open sea in clusters at high tide, sleep bobbing at sea at night, and dip beneath the shallows in bays and estuaries for their favorite food, sea lettuce. Rather than flying as other geese do in a V-formation, they porpoise along almost on the water's surface, leaderless but undulating in concert with the ocean swells, sideslipping into grape-like clusters, then stringing out irregularly like an accordion gone awry, honking all the while in a characteristically plaintive croak all their own.

Like other geese, the Atlantic brant is locked onto its migratory pattern so tightly that it will return year after year to the same wintering spots on the east coast from Massachusetts to North Carolina regardless of conditions there. They concentrate thickest along the New Jersey coast. In 1931 the species nosedived from a population of about a half million to 10 thousand birds in one season when a fungus killed off the eelgrass crop along the entire east coast.

(more)

Most of the birds died of starvation that year, with the survivors consisting only of those shrewd enough to seek out another kind of food-- sea lettuce. Slowly through the 40's and 50's Atlantic brant made a comeback, and with it was noted a distinct and basic shift in preferred diet from eelgrass to sea lettuce. Although eelgrass has long since returned to its former abundance the brant still continue to feed primarily on sea lettuce, as if the species is now imprinted with a native suspicion of eelgrass for the troubles it caused their ancestors.

The urge in brant to migrate north in the spring shows up first in the flocks wintering off the North Carolina coast in late February. By mid-March their restlessness and hopscotch movements north have prompted the same urge in other brant and large flocks gather off Monomoy Island, Massachusetts. By early May they arrive on their feeding grounds in the northern part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence where they stay until the end of the month. Then they usually begin their long overland flight to James Bay or Ungava Bay. From these two bays the migration continues to their Arctic Circle breeding grounds as weather permits in early June.

Atlantic brant nest on Southhampton Island, the Mellville Peninsula, and north into the Arctic Archipelago. They prefer low areas of grassy tundra close to water in the deltas and valleys of the Arctic. Their nest cup is built on rocks, debris, or on grass and is lined with grasses, mosses, lichens, and down. Brant nests are subject to destruction by summer storms because of their proximity to water.

Arctic breeding geese have precious little time to spare each summer to build nests, lay and hatch their eggs, and raise their young to flight stage. As soon as the goslings hatch in late June they are taken immediately to sea by the parents. By mid-September they are able to fly and make the southward migration along the eastern shore of Hudson Bay and James Bay, then overland to the Atlantic Coast.

Brant hunting was closed for 20 years after the 1931 eelgrass die-off. By 1951 when hunting was reopened the brant population had increased to more than 100,000. In 1971 the brant population was recorded at 150,000, but 1971 and 1972 proved to be disasterous years in terms of reproduction for these birds. If snow or ice remains on the Arctic nesting grounds in June when the brant arrive, egg laying is delayed and the young of the year may not have enough time to reach the flying stage before onset of the Arctic winter. No nesting is started if snow remains on the nesting grounds into late June.

Moreover, heavy rainfall along the east coast in the fall of 1971 destroyed the sea lettuce crop when the salinity of coastal bay waters was diluted. This forced the brant to fly into salt marshes and even into upland fields to feed. This atypical behavior exposed them to more hunting pressure than normal. By January 1972 the population was down to 40,000 birds; hunting was closed that fall. In 1974 the population was back up to 87,000, and 1975 was a good production year on the Arctic. The flight this fall is expected to exceed 150,000.

