



NEWS

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SERVICE PROPOSES ACTION TO STOP DESTRUCTION OF ARCTIC NESTING HABITAT BY REDUCING MID-CONTINENT LIGHT GOOSE POPULATIONS

In close coordination with the Canadian government, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed steps to reduce overabundant populations of mid-continent lesser snow geese and Ross' geese, known as "light geese," that are severely damaging the fragile arctic nesting areas they share with many other species.

Under the proposal, state wildlife agencies in 18 Midwestern and southern states could allow hunters to use unplugged shotguns and electronic calls during regular light goose seasons between September 1 and March 10, as long as all other migratory bird hunting seasons are closed at the time.

In addition, the Service is proposing to issue a conservation order that would allow state wildlife agencies to take light geese, using regulated hunting as a method, between March 10 and August 31 when all migratory bird sport hunting seasons are closed.

The two proposals address an ecological crisis caused by an explosion in mid-continent light goose populations from an estimated 800,000 geese in the 1960s to more than 3 million today. Service biologists consider this to be a conservative estimate and the actual population may be as high as 10 million birds. This is far more geese than the fragile arctic tundra with its short growing season can support.

The proposals are an initial step in trying to reduce the population. The Service is also changing the way it manages national wildlife refuges in the mid-continent region to make them less attractive to snow geese. In addition, the Service is considering non-lethal means such as harassment of geese during nesting season and destroying of eggs, although these approaches are restricted by the vastness and remoteness of the arctic habitat.

"Too many light geese are descending each year on nesting areas that simply cannot support them all," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "If we do not take steps now, these fragile ecosystems will continue to deteriorate to the point that they can no longer support light geese or the many other species of wildlife that share this arctic habitat."

"Continuing to allow this to happen when taking action now might prevent it is irresponsible," she said. "This is a human-made problem that requires a human-made solution."

"Canada and the United States have worked in close partnership to address the environmental crisis caused by the overabundance of lesser snow geese" said Gerald McKeating, regional director of Environmental Conservation Branch, Environment Canada, Prairie and Northern Region. "The steps proposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are a result of this partnership and are strongly supported by the Canadian Wildlife Service."

Light geese feed by grubbing, or pulling up and devouring, the roots of plants. This is a natural behavior and, at lower population levels, actually stimulates growth of some plants. However, with record numbers of geese, this grubbing has heavily damaged areas that were once lush in the summer months. Where the cord grasses and sedges preferred by geese once flourished, the ground is now cracked, bare, and dotted with sterile, salt-encrusted craters. Biologists question whether the severely damaged nesting areas will ever recover because, in the absence of plants, the soil has become saline.

In 1996, biologists surveying the 1,200-mile stretch of coastline along west Hudson Bay and James Bay where the birds nest estimated that 35 percent of the original habitat was destroyed and another 30 percent severely damaged.

Many bird species that nest in the same areas as the geese show signs of decline, including semi-palmated sandpipers, red-necked phalaropes, dowitchers, Hudsonian godwits, whimbrels, stilt sandpipers, yellow rails, American wigeons, northern shovelers, oldsquaws, red-breasted mergansers, parasitic jaegers, and Lapland longspurs, among others. In addition, the southern James Bay population of Canada geese is declining, presumably because of habitat degradation caused by light geese.

"For decades, we have striven to rebuild native wildlife populations," said Frank Gill, Senior Vice President for Science, National Audubon Society. "Now we must learn to protect vital habitats from the consequences of our own success. The scientific data show we must act now to protect the fragile tundra for scores of other bird and wildlife species."

Biologists believe the population explosion occurred primarily because of the rapid spread of soybean and rice farming in the snow goose wintering grounds in Texas, Louisiana, and other Gulf Coast states. Rice and soybean fields offer snow geese a rich banquet that leaves them fat and healthy for their northern migration.

Similarly, conversion of pastures to corn, barley, oats, rye, and wheat in the northern states and provinces along the migratory route offers additional sources of high nutrition during migration. As a result, natural mortality has fallen and the population has climbed 5 to 7 percent a year for more than three decades.

During the last 8 years, the Service has worked extensively with the Canadian Wildlife Service, state and provincial governments, Canada's indigenous peoples, and U.S. and Canadian conservation groups to assess the need for action and possible steps that might be taken to reduce the mid-continent light goose population. The proposals announced today are largely the result of these joint efforts.

The Service hopes to double or triple the annual harvest of mid-continent light geese to 1.5 million to 2.5 million birds with a goal of reducing the population by 50 percent within 4 years. This represents a total harvest of about 20 percent of the population annually, up from the current harvest of 8 percent.

The vast majority of light geese in the mid-continent population are lesser snow geese. These geese are notoriously hard to hunt because they are extremely wary and tend to flock together in huge numbers. The United States, Canada, and Mexico have increased snow goose sport hunting seasons to 107 days, the maximum allowed under the 1916 Migratory Bird Treaty. The countries also have increased bag limits to levels beyond those allowed for any other waterfowl species and eliminated possession limits (the number of geese a person legally may possess at one time).

While these measures have increased harvest, they have not been effective at reducing light goose populations. Raising bag limits any further would have little effect under current conditions since most hunters do not get a full bag.

Electronic calls have proven effective in attracting light geese. Unplugged shotguns would allow hunters to take more birds when the opportunity arises. The proposal to issue a conservation order would allow northern states to harvest birds during their spring migration. Under the conservation order, anyone taking a light goose must abide by all other regulations that are in effect during regular migratory bird hunting seasons.

The Service considered potential non-lethal means of reducing the light goose population including harassment and "egging," or destruction of eggs, on the nesting grounds. However, in a coastal area equal to the length of California and Texas combined that is subject to freezing temperatures and inhabited by polar bears these approaches are dangerous, ineffective, and cost-

prohibitive. The Service is also implementing changes in the way wildlife refuges are managed to reduce the amount of favorable habitat for the geese.

The Service published the proposals in today's Federal Register. The public may submit written comments on the proposals until January 8, 1999. Comments should be mailed to Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS 634, ARLSQ, 1849 C Street, NW., Washington, DC 20240.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.