NEWS
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REPORT WARNS THAT SNOW GOOSE POPULATION EXPLOSION THREATENS ARCTIC ECOSYSTEMS

In the mid-1980s, wildlife biologists and conservationists struggled to reverse a sharp decline in duck populations by restoring wetlands in key nesting areas. The effort was successful. Boosted by 3 years of plentiful rainfall and millions of acres of restored wetlands, this fall's duck migration was estimated to be the largest on record.

A decade later, biologists are facing a completely different challenge. Instead of too few ducks, the problem today is too many snow geese--so many, in fact, that they are causing ecological havoc on their arctic breeding grounds.

A recently published report by the Arctic Goose Habitat Working Group, comprised of U.S. and Canadian biologists, found that even liberalized hunting seasons for snow geese have failed to stop the population explosion and, by the most conservative estimates, the number of birds is rising at 5 percent a year.

The long-term impact of the population explosion is still uncertain, the report said, but the possibility exists that the overabundance could cause a decline in other species that nest in the same arctic region. These include semipalmated sandpipers, red-necked phalaropes, yellow rails, American wigeons, northern shovelers, and a variety of passerines.

"The geese are literally consuming their own habitat," said Paul Schmidt, chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Management Office and co-chair of the Arctic Goose Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. "They break open the turf and uproot plants, especially grasses and sedges, leading to erosion and increased soil salinity. In turn, fewer plants grow and you have a vicious cycle with habitat conditions growing worse each year. The end result is a degradation of the fragile arctic ecosystem. It is an ecosystem in peril."

The Working Group's report cited changes in agricultural practices that have increased food supplies and reduced the winter mortality rate among snow geese. In addition, the growing availability of Federal and state refuges has expanded the suitable habitat for the birds and dispersed geese over wide areas, increasing survival rates.

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Action needs to be taken soon, Schmidt said. "The damage to the ecosystem is not only severe but it also has the potential to be long-lasting," he said. "Experiments show it takes at least 15 years for grasses to begin to come back on damaged, hypersaline soil."

While hunting is certainly part of a solution, the report said that more recreational hunting as governed by current regulations and treaty obligations is unlikely to solve the problem by itself.

Possible solutions cited in the report include loosening regulations on baiting, electronic calls, and concealment during spring "snow goose only" seasons; expanding late season hunting before March 10; and negotiating a revision to the Migratory Bird Convention with Canada to allow appropriate hunting of migratory birds between March 10 and September 1.

"These are uncommon solutions, but these are uncommon times and we can't sit by and ignore this problem," Schmidt said. "We expect to discuss the problem during the coming year and develop an effective strategy in 1998."

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