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DNR News Releases

8 cool things you should know about Canada geese

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Canada geese can be seen all across Iowa. These big birds, who can be spotted flying in their well-known V formations, have some pretty interesting features. Check out these fun facts about Canada geese:

Quick learners

Baby geese, called goslings, are impressionable little birds. They've been known to follow just about anything that moves, from dogs to humans, mistaking the creatures for their mother. The impressionable young use this skill to mimic the adults, learning how to swim just 24 hours after hatching. At only one day old, goslings can dive 30 to 40 feet underwater.

Parent geese teach their young how to fly when the goslings are two to three months old. The goslings will stay with their parents for the first year of their life and even migrate with the adults that year.

As the goslings continue to grow and become more independent of their parents, they may group together with other young geese. These groups, called "gang broods," can consist of up to 100 goslings.

Partners for life

Canada geese don't start looking for a mate until they're two or three years old. While looking for a mate, the geese use assortative mating, meaning they look for a goose about the same size as themselves. The birds mate for life, which can be anywhere from 10 to 25 years. If their partner dies, the remaining goose will try to find a new one.

Hefty birds

The Canada geese in Iowa belong to the largest of its subspecies. Historically, these birds have been known as "giant" Canada geese and are the largest geese in the world. Most adults weigh between five and 14 pounds, with some weighing up to 20 pounds. Females weigh slightly less than males.

Almost wiped out

In the early 1900s, giant Canada geese nearly became extinct. Programs began to reestablish the subspecies. One program, which occurs each year, involves rounding up geese and putting a band around their leg. These bands help researchers learn about the geese's migratory patterns and their life span. With protections and research, the bird will continue to thrive.

Seasoned travelers

Since geese need open water where they can swim away from land predators, as well as for food, frozen winter water doesn't suit the birds. Geese will travel from 2,000 to 3,000 miles during the winter if they can't find open water, returning to their birth place in the spring. Canada geese can travel 1,500 miles in a day if the weather permits. These birds tend to fly around 40 miles per hour during migration, though that can increase up to 70 miles per hour if they catch a strong tailwind. Migrating groups tend to have 30 to 100 birds.

Energy efficient flight

The "V" formation geese travel in makes them recognizable even high in the sky. Each bird in line flies a little higher than the goose in front of it. One explanation for the formation is that the front bird breaks the headwind so the birds behind it can draft along the airflow from the front. Geese communicate by honks while migrating and shift positions so the birds can take turns flying in the front to help the geese from getting too tired.

Winged and dangerous

Canada geese aren't afraid to face a threat. If a parent goose feels something is a threat to their nest or goslings, they may attack. Stretching out their neck while hissing and honking loudly serves as a warning to predators, along with biting and slapping with their wings.

Once a year, usually when the weather warms up, geese molt their feathers. During this 6-week period, geese are unable to fly, leaving them vulnerable to predators including coyotes, foxes and raccoons. Water plays an important role in the safety of geese. They'll retreat into water if their warnings don't scare predators away.

Geese in the suburbs

As urbanization increases, Canada goose migration decreases. Expansive, manicured lawns and man-made ponds have become new favorite hangouts for these birds. Natural predators aren't very common in these spots, and constructed water areas are often heated and don't freeze during the winter. Geese love the large grass spaces because they can digest grass and have wide, unobstructed views to keep an eye out for anything coming toward their young. With food, water and safe places, these geese no longer need to leave during the winter.

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