



Nature Guides

Migrating Waterbirds—Landing on Water Near You!

Late–October–2010

Featured Species: Those @#\$%^&#\$\$!!! Geese

Question: When are taxonomists a positive force for biodiversity?

Answer: When they make two new species out of one old one!

Just when you thought that you had enough geese now you have more: science has split the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) into a large-bodied, interior- and southern-breeding species (still *Branta canadensis*), and a small-bodied tundra-breeding species, the Cackling Goose (now *B. hutchinsii*). To make things even more confusing, there are four Cackling subspecies and seven Canada subspecies.


Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

Evolution, Diversity and the Sustainability of Life

Secondary

The obvious difference is size, as shown in this photo. And keep in mind that our resident Canadian, the Giant Canada Goose, is even bigger than *canadensis* above. And the Giant is really a success story. Nearly eliminated in early 1900's by over-hunting and loss of habitat, the Giant Canada Goose was believed to have gone extinct by the 1950s. But in 1962, a small flock was discovered wintering in Minnesota. With improved conservation practices and habitat recreation and preservation programs, their populations have recovered in most of their range. Too well, according to some, but when you build great habitat (short grass near water), eliminate predators and provide lots of food, you have to expect that they will come. Most of the birds you see now on our lakes and rivers will be these Giants. Most of the Cackling and other Canada Goose subspecies will have moved further south, but a few may still intermingle as they rest along their way. See if you can spot any smaller geese when they raft up.

It might be easier to see Snow Geese , distinctive, almost all-white waterfowl (although there are also "blue phase" birds with blue-gray colouration) which can occasionally be found among Canadas and other water birds. Vast flocks overfly areas to the east (Greater Snow Goose) and west (Lesser Snow Goose) of south central Ontario while on migration. The occasional bird gets blown off-course and ends up spending a few days with us late in October before moving on.

Other Happenings:

- Other arriving waterbirds include Buffleheads, Common Goldeneye and Hooded Mergansers. Departing are those White-crowned Sparrows and White-throated Sparrows that so recently moved in, as well as Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles (a bird in decline across N. America), although the latter two quit using our feeder weeks ago.
- Golden Eagle 42, a young male Golden Eagle that was found injured, rehabilitated, banded and outfitted with a satellite transmitter in Minnesota last winter, has begun what looks to be a quick fall migration. It departed the Franklin Lakes area, Nunavut on October 6th and by the 15th had entered Ontario, travelling 1,444.23km! Keeping watching to see where he spends the winter!
- Porcupines are beginning to mate, if you can imagine what that must be like. Fortunately for the male, the underside of the female's tail does not have quills. The male also does an elaborate dance for the female, and sprays urine on her head. Why this doesn't make her very angry is beyond me. This also means that porcupines are a bit more active and wandering. If they're on the roads, their instinct is not to run, so take care at night.

- [Lake Trout](#) are spawning over shallow rubble shoals in lakes when temperatures drop to around 10°C. Ask anglers about any possible locations in your area. You can often spot them spawning at night using a high-powered flashlight. In [Algonquin Provincial Park on Opeongo Lake](#), researchers have been tagging, and now [sonically tagging](#), Lake Trout in order to estimate population size, survival rates, spatial distribution, tag loss, and fishing pressure, and to improve monitoring technologies. Lake Trout are actually not trout, but a [char](#).
- Both trout and chars are in the [salmon family](#), and OMNR's [Kids' Fish Art Contest](#) currently features two other salmon family species: Rainbow Trout and Lake Whitefish. [Learn about and draw](#) one or both of these fish and win great prizes!
- You can still find some [wasps](#) (which you may have seen a lot of this summer), [flies](#) and [ladybird beetles](#) on sun-warmed building sides. But frosts have begun – keep your ears tuned for the silence that means the end of most insect activity.
- Those [Heath Asters](#) should be finishing up, ending the wildflower season for another year (but not all blooming – stay tuned

Waste Reduction Week
in Canada:
October 18–24, 2010