



# United States Department of the Interior

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## **Santee Refuge and Partners Initiate Study to Determine Movement Patterns of Migratory Canada Geese Wintering in Santee Area**

Summerton, S. C..... Santee National Wildlife Refuge, the S. C. Department of Natural Resources, and Clemson University are finalizing plans for a research project to study the wintering ecology of migratory Canada geese in South Carolina. Researchers will be trying to determine the wintering range of migratory Canada geese around the Santee Refuge and will catalog the various habitats used by these birds. Satellite telemetry devices will be used to study how the South Carolina population of Southern James Bay Canada geese migrates, where they breed, and where the migration pathways are between South Carolina and their breeding grounds.

Historically, the Canada Goose (*Branta Canadensis*) was a common winter migrant to South Carolina and occurred in a variety of locations across the state. However, the wintering population of migratory geese in the state has declined by approximately 97 percent over the past 35 years. Canada geese observed and counted in S. C. during the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) annual mid-winter waterfowl survey declined from 44,400 in 1964 to 1,500 in 2002. These declines have occurred despite overall increases in the Atlantic Flyway Population of Canada geese. The most commonly accepted explanation for the regional decline is the "short-stopping" of geese in the northern parts of the flyway. Readily available cereal grains and the intensity of waterfowl management in northern states have resulted in Canada geese remaining in the northern states instead of continuing to their ancestral wintering areas in South Carolina.

Existing data suggest that groups of migratory Canada geese that winter in S. C. originate from breeding populations in Southern James Bay and Hudson Bay, Canada. Wintering populations of these geese in S. C. are thought to be a unique subpopulation in the Atlantic Flyway. Annual waterfowl surveys indicate that the last wild flock in the state winters on the Santee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) with small groups of birds also possibly occurring on the Carolina Sandhills NWR. Regionally, a wintering population also occurs on the Pee Dee NWR in North Carolina.

Santee NWR is South Carolina's primary migratory goose wintering area and serves as the Atlantic Flyway's southernmost population of Southern James Bay Canada geese. The number of Canada geese wintering at the Santee NWR has also declined over the last three decades. In 1964, around 22,500 birds wintered there. This number steadily declined to approximately 14,700 in 1969, 5,800 in 1978, and < 1,000 in 1990. Current estimates are similar or only slightly higher with an estimated wintering population of 1,000-1,200 geese.

The planned Canada Goose Study seeks to collect data needed to address two wildlife management issues that have been exacerbated by the low and declining numbers of migratory geese. The first and more local issue focuses on understanding how to better manage hunting opportunities for Canada geese in S.C. Historically, sportsman placed a high trophy status on harvesting wild geese in the Santee area. Because of declines in S. C.'s wintering migratory goose numbers, the goose hunting season was closed in 1980. During the same period, there was an effort to establish resident populations of Canada geese throughout the state in order to provide goose hunting opportunities. By 1992, the resident goose population had expanded enough to allow harvest.

In order to protect the declining migratory geese from harvest, Clarendon County (which includes Santee National Wildlife Refuge) was closed to the harvest of resident geese. Area hunters have recently requested that the S. C. Department of Natural Resources reconsider opening a portion of Clarendon County for hunting of resident geese based on the assumption that migratory geese do not inhabit areas outside of the Santee Refuge boundary. Although the potential exists to expand the hunting zone without impacting migratory geese, state and federal wildlife managers must have a better understanding of the home range and habitat use of wintering migratory geese in the Santee area. These management issues require careful consideration to avoid potential adverse impacts to the last known migratory Canada goose flock wintering in South Carolina.

The second, and more long-term issue, focuses on land use changes in the South Carolina coastal plain. The continued viability of this historical wintering area for migratory Southern James Bay Geese is of great concern. Like many areas in the S. C. coastal zone, intense pressure exists to urbanize the undeveloped landscape surrounding the Santee NWR. Home range areas and habitat use of the S. C. migratory goose population is currently unknown, although general observation suggests that these geese feed and loaf on private lands adjacent to and near the refuge that are currently targeted for development. It is likely that with increasing human population growth and land use changes, disturbance factors will increase and the available habitat for migratory geese will shrink towards the boundaries of the Santee NWR. With the satellite telemetry units, researchers will be able to track geese to their breeding grounds, learn the migratory pathways they take to and from their wintering areas, and provide additional conservation recommendations to the Atlantic Flyway Council for South Carolina populations and beyond.

Data collected and analyzed during the study will be used to develop harvest strategies and habitat management recommendations aimed at providing needed habitat for wintering geese in S. C. It is possible that data detailing areas and habitats used by the wintering migratory Canada geese in and around the Santee NWR could allow for an expansion of recreational opportunities for sportsmen and assist in managing a growing local population of resident geese. Ultimately, managers and biologists will be able to use this data to make informed decisions and provide guidance to local governments, community planners, and developers on needed habitat protection, conservation and enhancement efforts for this unique subpopulation of migratory geese.

Santee National Wildlife Refuge, S. C. Department of Natural Resources, and Clemson University would like to thank the S. C. Delta Waterfowl Committees, SCDucks.com, and two private donors for providing funding support of this project.

Call Santee National Wildlife Refuge at 803-478-2217 to obtain additional information on this study or to learn about wildlife observation and public use opportunities on the refuge. National Wildlife Refuges protect some of our nation's most unique, spectacular and truly wild places. Learn more about your National Wildlife Refuge System by following the links from <http://refuges.fws.gov> to find information on your favorite refuge destination.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 96-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 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 Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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