

# A Goose Story

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(With special thanks to Karen Barthold for help)  
(PowerPoint prepared by Amy Preston)

Gussie fluffed her wings, stretched, and looked around her. A deafening noise had awakened her, and she wanted to know what the noise was all about. Everywhere she turned Canada geese were honking to each other and gathering into their family groups. She saw her friend Rosie nearby and honked, "Hey, what's going on?" "It's Migration time you silly Canada goose!" Rosie called back.

"We are all going south to Blackwater Wildlife Refuge for the winter. See you there!" With that, Rosie and her family took off flying south.

The migration? Already? Gussie suddenly wished she had paid more attention to Mrs. Gander during migration class. She started to hurry back to the nesting area where she was sure her own family group would gather.



Boom! Crash! Gussie looked down to see a distinguished old goose floundering on the ground. " Oh, I'm so sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going," Gussie apologized, her beak blushing in embarrassment.

" That's quite all right. I remember how excited I was before my first migration" said Mr. Geoffrey D. Goose picking himself up with a laugh and dusting off his feathers. Mr. Geoffrey was one of the oldest geese Gussie knew and he had made the trip to Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, on the Eastern shore of Maryland, many times before.



“ Mr. Geoffrey,” Gussie said, “I’ve never left the nesting grounds of James Bay before! How will I know where to go? Suppose I get lost? How can I possibly fly that far? Why do we need to leave Canada to go to Blackwater?”

“ Whoa! Slow down there, young’ un!” Mr. Geoffrey laughed again. “ I can only answer one question at a time.” Gussie took a deep breath, thought hard, and started asking questions. “ How do we get to Blackwater?” “That’s easy” Mr. Geoffrey said. “Geese and other migratory birds travel on the flyways to their destinations.”

“ Flyways? What’s a flyway?” asked Gussie.



**“ Flyways,” Mr. Geoffrey explained, “ are the pathways or corridors of flight most waterfowl follow when they migrate.”**

He told her that there were four major flyways in North America each named for the area of the continent they covered. He drew a map on the ground and labeled where the four flyways were located. Then he showed Gussie where Blackwater Refuge was located.

“ See, we are up here at James Bay. We are going to follow the Atlantic flyway all the way down to Blackwater Refuge, right here.”

“ Pretty neat,” said Gussie. “ But I’m still not sure why we want to go there.”

( Can **you** draw North America and then Draw in the 4 Major Flyways?  
Hint: Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic!!! )

**“ Actually,” said Mr. Geoffrey, “ Canada geese never went to the refuge before the 1940’s. Our great-great-grandparents used to winter on the Chesapeake Bay and feed on the grasses there.”**

“But then the local farmers started using a machine, a corn picker, which actually left more corn on the ground then it harvested. Your ancestors flew over, spotted the leftover corn and decided to stop.

We’ve been stopping there ever since. In 1942 only about 5,000 geese wintered at Blackwater. But word got around and by 1963 the number of Canada geese at the refuge reached 105,000.”

“Wow,” said Gussie, “ That’s a lot of geese!”



" Yes, it sure was!" Mr. Geoffrey said. " But after 1963 things started to get tough for geese. The wetlands started to disappear. Drought came. The refuge had less land for growing crops. More people started hunting Canada geese, and there were some poor nesting seasons. Facing these difficulties, our numbers began to decline. In 1992 there were only 20,000 geese. Thanks to the hard working folks of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, though, our numbers are growing once again."

" I'm sure glad we have people out there to make sure that there will always be some habitat left for us and other migratory waterfowl." Gussie returned to her questions. " So what kinds of food do they have at Blackwater anyway?"

" Let me tell you" Said Mr. Geoffrey with a big smile, " They have it all! Most of the food at Blackwater is our favorite- three square bulrush. In fact it's the primary plant species at Blackwater. You can find it throughout more than 12,000 acres near Cambridge, Maryland, that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has set aside for migratory waterfowl. There's plenty to eat in the brackish marsh and open water areas of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge."

*(Can You define Brackish Marsh?)*

**“ Yum!” Gussie fluttered her feathers excitedly. Mr. Geoffrey continued, “ The folks at Blackwater also manage more than 460 acres of crop lands just for migratory waterfowl to eat.”**

“They make sure that there is a diversity of food sources available for us on our journeys. We need foods that provide us with carbohydrates for energy and proteins for molting and growth and we need foods that will help geese return to the breeding grounds with enough reserves to have a successful nesting season.”

“Which crops are the ones with all the carbohydrates in them?” wondered Gussie aloud. “ I’d like to build up my fat so I’ll be ready for winter.”





" The refuge staff plant crops of millet, soybeans, sorghum ( also called milo), corn, and buckwheat. All of these provide us with the important fat building carbohydrates we need. They also plant several types of clover, winter rye grass, and winter wheat as sources of green browse for us to feed on."

Gussie considered this. " I heard that as an adult I'll have to eat a ½ pound of food a day. That sounds like a lot, even if I do love the taste of shoots and roots on the clover and that three square bulrush."

Mr. Geoffrey reminded her, "You'll eat less food during warm weather, but you'll eat more food during cold weather and before long distance flights so it all balances out."

" But I thought we didn't eat when it was cold." Gussie said.

" No, No," said Mr. Geoffrey. " Only in extreme cold do we stop eating. When it's very cold out, we conserve energy by not flying. We also tuck our feet and bills up into our down feathers to conserve heat."

" Boy," Gussie giggled, "Those down feathers sure are soft! They tickle my feet!"

As the young goose and the old goose discussed migration, Gussie's friend George approached them. "Hi, Gussie," he said shyly.

"Hi George. Will your family be going to Blackwater this fall?" Gussie asked.

"Yup. How about you, Gussie? Are you going?"

"I sure am, George! Guess I'll see you there" said Gussie.

"Ok. Have a good trip" said George as he ambled over to where his family stood.

"You too." Gussie Replied.



Mr. Geoffrey laughed. " You two seem like a perfect match. You know, Gussie, you'll have to start thinking about finding a mate in another couple of years. Since Canada geese mate for life, you need to make sure you find the right goose for you. George is one of the nicest young males I know." Gussie blushed and stole a look at her future mate.

Mr. Geoffrey stretched his wings in the cool Canadian air. "Well, do you have any more questions for me, Gussie?"

"I have just one last question. How do we know when to migrate from James Bay to Blackwater? And how do we know when to come back to Canada again?"



**“ Now that is a tough one. It could be any number of things that let us know when to migrate. Perhaps it’s the change in the length of the day. Perhaps we notice change in the weather conditions. Or maybe we get restless when food starts becoming scarce. Who knows? Geese follow their instinct.”**

“So every year we leave James Bay here in Canada and head down to Blackwater in the early fall. Then come late February to mid-March we fly back up north again to nest.”

“ Thanks, Mr. Geoffrey. I sure learned a lot today about migration! So I’ll see you at Blackwater?” Gussie asked.

“ You can count on it!” said Mr. Geoffrey with a smile.



# Hope You Enjoyed this Story



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