

Dusky Canada Goose (Dusky)

Description

- Dark-colored; often with little color differentiation between neck and head. A few birds may have a neck ring. Color is a 5 or less on the Munsell soil color chart. Collar colors are red or green.
- Culmen length 40 mm to 50 mm.
- Generally broader in appearance, including broader wings, than Taverner's or lesser.
- Dusky's are smaller than western and Vancouver Canada goose subspecies. They are larger than Taverner's, cacklers, and lessers.
- Dusky's are most commonly mistaken for Taverner's and cacklers due to similarities in size and body shape and coloration.
- If a bird seems unwary, comes right in, flies low, etc., be cautious, this is common behavior for a dusky.
- Dusky's have a deep moaning call similar to a western.



Figure 61: Dusky Canada geese.



Figure 62: Dusky Canada geese behind decoys.



Figure 63: Duskys in flight; note dark brown breasts sharply contrasting with white bellies.



Figure 64: Sunlight can make duskys appear much lighter; notice red neck collar on third goose from the right.



Figure 65: Red-collared dusky Canada geese.



Figure 66: Dusky Canada goose in front of western Canada geese.



Figure 67: Dusky Canada goose in flight; note the broad wings and little contrast between breast and neck.



Figure 68: Very light dusky Canada geese with red neck collars



Figure 69: Three dusky Canada geese (foreground) with cackling geese; notice the size of the duskys compared to the cacklers.



Figure 70: Typical dark dusky Canada geese.



Figure 71: Dusky Canada goose in flight; notice the distinction between the white rear and dark breast, and little distinction between the neck and breast.



Figure 72: Dusky Canada geese and two Taverner's geese (1) (above and to the right of the two red-collared duskys).



Figure 73: Dusky Canada geese in flight; notice chocolate brown breasts.



Figure 74: Light-colored dusky Canada geese; notice long necks and broad wings.



Figure 75: A flock of dusky Canada geese in flight.



Figure 76: Dusky Canada geese; notice longer culmen (bill) and long necks.



Figure 77: Dusky Canada geese; notice dark breasts merge with black necks.



Figure 78: Dusky Canada geese in flight.

Distribution

The dusky nests primarily on the Copper River Delta in Alaska (see Figure 79). It is the only goose that winters almost exclusively in the Willamette Valley and lower Columbia River. A few birds winter on the Oregon coast.



Figure 79: Migration route of the dusky Canada goose.

History

The dusky has very specific habitat preferences and a limited geographic breeding range, and for these reasons their population has always been small. The 1964 earthquake in Alaska uplifted the Copper River Delta, the primary breeding ground for dusky, by 2 to 6 feet, drastically altering the frequency of tidal inundation and promoting drying of slough banks and meadow. The drier conditions and lack of suppression by saltwater prompted a growth of shrubs such as alder and willow that are now 10 to 20 feet tall and extend over much of the delta. Reduced salinity is also thought to have altered nutrient levels and aquatic productivity, possibly affecting food resources for adult geese and their broods.

During the past 30 years, increased predation by brown bears, wolves, coyotes and bald eagles has had a major impact on dusky production, although the intensity is variable from year to year. Subsistence harvest of dusky is not an issue. Thus, the productivity of dusky Canada geese is being affected by gradual long-term habitat changes, annual conditions such as weather, increased levels of predation, and an increasing average age of the population. Canada geese generally do not nest until their third year of life.

Middleton Island, located in the Gulf of Alaska about 60 miles offshore from the Copper River Delta, currently has approximately 1,500 breeding dusky geese. The island has likely reached its carrying capacity, but it remains an important breeding area because the geese breeding there do not suffer from the depressed productivity the Copper River Delta dusky geese face.

Prior to the 1970s, dusky made up the vast majority of the fewer than 25,000 Canada geese that wintered in the region. However, beginning in about 1979 the dusky population began to sharply decline while the population of other subspecies, especially Taverner's and westerns, increased. The overall dusky population reached 10,000 to 14,000 birds in the mid-1990s and is currently considered stable at about 16,000. This management success has been the result of efforts to increase production on the breeding grounds in concert with harvest regulation within the Permit Zone.

Behavior

This subspecies is relatively unwary and prefers habitat characterized by enclosed areas such as small ponds and small fields lined with trees. It flies low and is easy to lure to decoys, making it an easy target for hunters.

Management

Many actions are underway to improve dusky production. Cooperative efforts between the Chugach National Forest, Ducks Unlimited, and fish and wildlife agencies have created over 500 artificial nest islands on the delta in the attempt to provide secure nest sites away from brushy corridors most heavily used by predators. Use of these structures is gradually increasing, and so far nesting success has been higher for birds using the structures than those using traditional nest sites. Use of nest islands by geese is a learned experience, and the degree to which this program will help improve production will be seen in the years ahead. Ways to deal with predation have been explored thoroughly by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and some steps have been taken (liberalization of regulations affecting coyote harvest and translocation of bears); however, truly effective measures to limit predator losses are either prohibitively expensive or socially unacceptable. Cutbacks in Alaska hunting seasons have also occurred, including bag limits and season length.

Future

The limited number of dusky Canada geese was the reason for the creation of the Permit Zone, which has been successful in helping to maintain and even increase the survival rates of duskys. However, the future of the dusky is still uncertain. The subspecies' narrow habitat preferences and restricted geographic range make it susceptible to changes in management and environmental disruption. Numerous management activities will continue to focus on this subspecies of concern. In the meantime it is critical that the dusky harvest stay at low levels.