

Wild Geese in Captivity

by Bob Elgas
Big Timber, Montana

Man has always been fascinated by, and has had a close association with, wild geese. As a result of their tendency to vocalize an objection to nocturnal disturbances, the early Romans utilized them as watchdogs.

Wild geese were frequently depicted on ancient structures. Indeed, the Swan goose of China, and the Greylag of Europe were domesticated eons ago, long before the dawn of written history. Even today the fascination

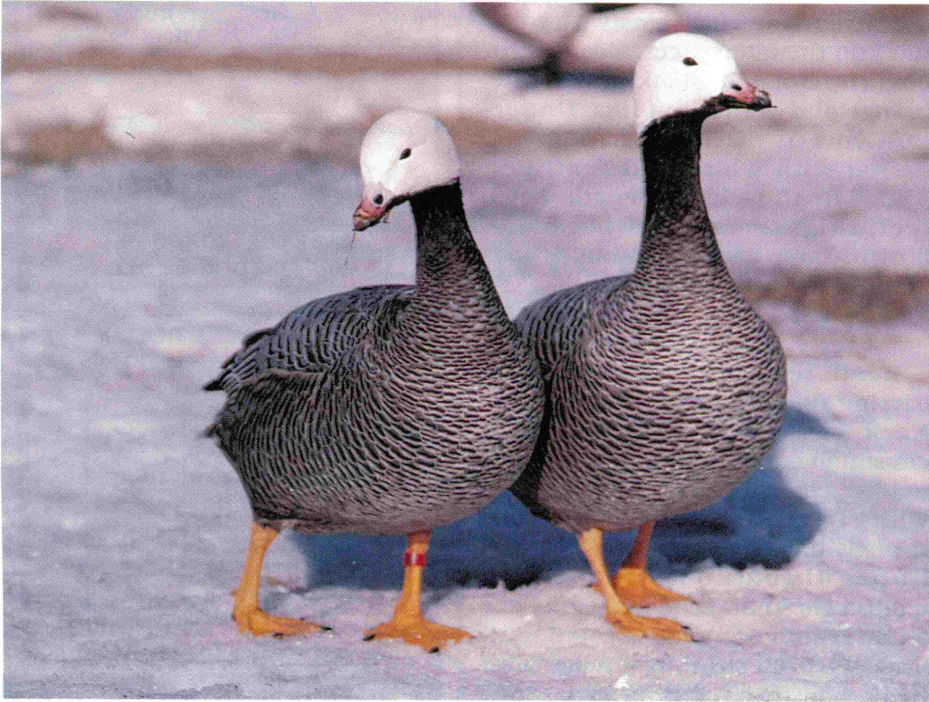
exists, and wild geese have become increasingly popular with aviculturists.

Throughout the world there are some 15 species of wild geese, with numerous sub-species, all of which are native to the northern hemisphere. Interestingly, there are no true geese in the southern hemisphere. South America is represented by a specialized group known as sheldgeese, while Africa and Australia are represented by a number of birds with goose-like characteristics. Sheldgeese are actually modified ducks which, through the evolutionary process, have assumed goose-like similarities. One of the more obvious differences is the dimorphism of sexes characterized by sheldgeese — males being of completely different plumage than females. In true geese, both sexes are alike. Although the birds from the southern hemisphere are interesting in their own right, the differences are so great that they cannot be classified with the true geese.

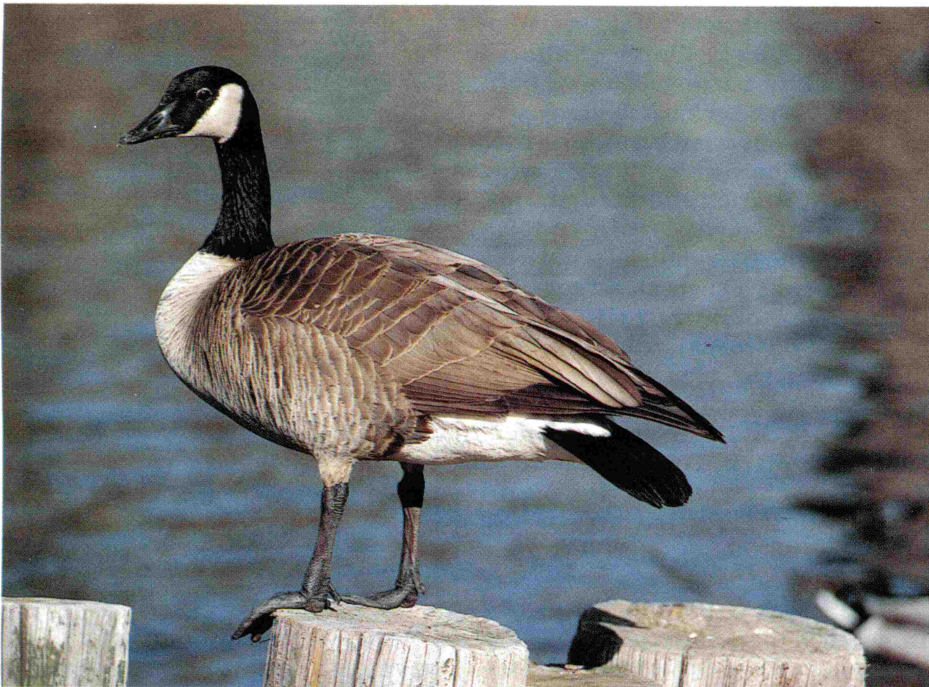
The geese of the northern hemisphere are divided into two groups — the genus *Anser*, which is representative of the true geese, and the genus *Branta*, which represents a group known as Brent geese. The two forms are very closely allied. True geese differ from Brent geese in that they have colored feet and bills, with yellow, pink and orange being the norms, whereas feet and bills of Brent geese are always black. Although, as previously mentioned, the two forms are closely allied, they are nonetheless sufficiently different that on the rare occasions when they hybridize the resulting offspring are sterile.

Perhaps the best known of North American geese is the Canada goose, *Branta canadensis*. As the scientific name indicates, it is a member of the family of Brent geese, and is represented by at least a dozen well defined sub-species. The European Greylag, *Anser anser anser*, a member of the clan of true geese, is one of the most familiar of the Eurasian area. It was domesticated thousands of years ago, and such forms as the Toulouse, Embden, Sebastopol and others have resulted. The name Greylag is interesting. The first part of the

Photos by George A. Allen III, Salt Lake City, Utah



A representative of the genus *Anser* is this pair of Emperor geese (*Anser canagicus*).



The Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) shows off the dark feet and beak typical of the *Branta* genus.

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name is an obvious reference to plumage coloration. The latter part refers to the fact that they are late migrants and lag behind other geese in migration — thus Greylag, a grey goose which is a laggard! They are fine birds, and fortunately still exist in reasonable numbers throughout much of the old world.

Wild geese have been kept for centuries in Europe and Asia, and have more recently become popular in North America. Many excellent collections now exist in both Canada and the United States. Wild geese adjust well to captivity and, indeed, geese and humans appear to have an affinity one for the other. Given proper care, they thrive in captivity, and appear perfectly comfortable in a confined environment.

There is much to recommend geese to the aviculturist. All are handsome, and some spectacularly so. They tend to be both peaceful and gentle — much more so than their domestic counterparts. They breed well in captivity, their needs are not difficult, and they enjoy rather lengthy life-spans. Availability of most species of geese is good, and prices are reasonable. As compared to macaws, for

example, the price for a pair of rare geese can be a pleasant surprise.

Aviculturists are frequently unaware of the requirements for the proper maintenance of geese. Our facility in Montana encompasses approximately 50 acres, and features a number of lakes and ponds. Interspersed are areas for grazing and loafing, all of which combine to make rather an ideal situation. Inasmuch as our flock contains several hundred birds, a fairly spacious area is indicated. Having made that description, it should be added that such a condition is far from a necessity. Geese can be maintained in a much smaller area, and actually adapt well to what might be described as a "back yard" situation. Given proper care, a pair of geese can be maintained perfectly well in a pen structure as small as ten feet by ten feet, and will, in fact, with good care, breed and rear young in such surroundings.

As is true with cattle and sheep, geese are grazing animals. Their primary sustenance is grass. Their digestive systems are geared to the ingestion of quantities of high fiber, low protein food. Nothing could be more descriptive of the needs of wild geese than the old nursery rhyme, "Three gray geese in a field full of grazing, gray were the geese and green was the grazing". Certainly to a goose, a field of green grazing is the ultimate in luxury. Green grass of spring and summer is the perfect food. However, geese will feed with equal gusto on the cured and brown grasses of fall and winter. In captivity, even when an abundance of grazing is available, supplementary food should be provided. All geese enjoy whole grains such as corn and wheat. Prepared feeds, such as turkey or chicken supplements, are excellent. Many commercial feeds are medicated, and feeds with such additives should be avoided. Non-medicated feeds, and those of approximately 16% protein are best. Geese which do not have natural grazing should be provided with supplemental green food. Greens such as lettuce and celery are very palatable, and provide the bulk their systems require. It is wise to wash such food to remove any possible residue of agricultural chemicals that might exist.

Once paired, geese mate for life. They are highly sociable and, in flock structures, individuals co-exist peacefully with one another. However, during the breeding season, breeders

are territorial and their chosen areas are defended against intruders — especially other geese. To prevent conflict in small enclosures, it is best to place but one breeding pair per pen. All geese breed in the water and, if fertile eggs are to be produced, swimming water is essential. Frequently there is confusion as to what constitutes swimming water. An expanse of water need be but sufficiently large to allow both birds to float themselves in close proximity to one another. A child's plastic wading pool as little as four feet in diameter and six inches in depth will provide adequate water. It is important that the geese can enter the water easily, and it is especially important that the water be changed frequently and kept clean. Breeding birds should be provided adequate nesting material in the form of dried vegetation — grasses, leaves, etc. The female will normally scrape a small depression into which the eggs are deposited. Eggs are usually produced on alternate days, and, although variable, a common clutch size is five. As eggs are laid, they are covered with nest material until the clutch is completed, at which time the female lines the nest with down plucked from her breast, and incubation begins. All incubation is done by the female, and the male remains near, guarding the female and nest. When necessary, both male and female defend the nest with vigor. Incubation varies according to species, and ranges from about 22 to 28 days. As one might expect, the smaller species usually have a shorter incubation time than their larger cousins. Frequently, geese are equated sizewise to the familiar Canada goose. Indeed, the Canada is one of the larger geese, and many varieties are substantially smaller. Surprisingly, some are but slightly larger than mallard ducks.

Goslings are precocious and, soon after hatching, leave the nest and follow their parents. Their feeding requirements are much like adults, with tender grass a basic. They, too, should be provided with supplemental food — chicken or turkey crumbles of a non-medicated variety. Initially they can be given a high protein starter ration. Once the youngsters are well started (a week to ten days), the protein count of supplemental food should not exceed 16%. Goslings have digestive systems geared to the same low protein, high fiber diets as adults. As one might



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imagine, waterfowl drink large quantities of water. Geese are no exception and pure, fresh water must be constantly available. Goslings do not require swimming water and, in fact, are better off being watered from a commercial device from which they can drink without actually getting into the water. Frequently, persons who breed geese do not allow the parents to rear the young. Hand rearing usually results in a higher rate of survival than with parent-reared young. Wild geese grow rapidly. Within six to seven weeks, they are nearly grown, fully feathered, and capable of flight.

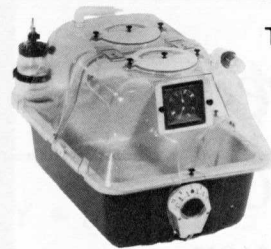
Native migratory birds, which includes waterfowl, are regulated at both state and federal levels. To legally possess native waterfowl, one must be properly licensed. Fortunately, licensing is not difficult. Information is obtainable from Departments of Fish and Game at state capitols, and from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Interior Building, Washington, D.C. at the federal level. Exotic waterfowl, those not native to North America, are not regulated and require no permits.

Regarding weather conditions, geese are hardy. With the possible exception of the Hawaiian, or Nene, goose which does not tolerate extreme cold, other varieties are virtually unaffected by low temperatures. Given reasonable care, all geese are relatively free from diseases and are easily maintained. What has been written here is but a basic outline of their captive requirements. For those who might be interested in more detailed information, a number of good books are available. There are also organizations, such as the International Wild Waterfowl Association and the American Pheasant and Waterfowl Society, which have a membership comprised of persons involved in the husbandry of waterfowl.

To summarize — wild geese adapt well to captivity. There is a natural bond between geese and humans, which makes them an excellent choice for the aviculturist. Too often we fail to recognize how elegantly beautiful waterfowl can be. To those who may have admired wild geese, but feared they might be difficult to maintain, be assured that such is not true. Indeed, they are one of the most easily kept birds, and certainly one of the most rewarding. Don't be afraid to give them a try. ●

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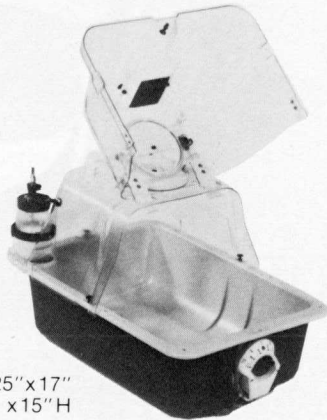
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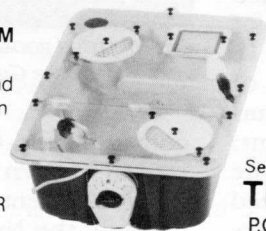


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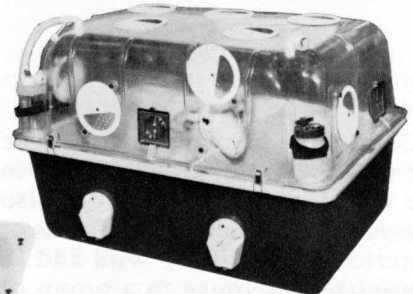
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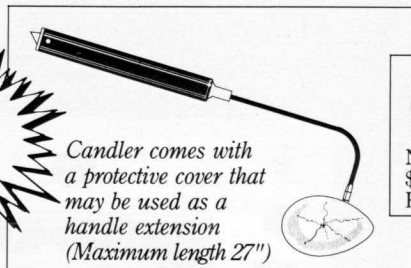
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