



species factsheet

| species introduction |

Common name: Snow goose

Scientific name: *Chen caerulescens*

The snow goose is a medium sized goose and a characteristic migrating bird of the Arctic tundra. Two subspecies are recognized, differentiated by size:

- *C. c. caerulescens* (Lesser Snow Goose) (Linnaeus, 1758) – Wrangel Islands (off NE Russia); N Alaska E to Baffin island. Winters along the Gulf of Mexico, New Mexico/California
- *C. c. atlanticus* (Greater Snow Goose) (Kennard, 1927) - NW Greenland and islands in N Baffin Bay and winters in the Delmarva Peninsula region. Siberian populations migrate to Korea and China.



Lesser snow goose at Bosque del Apache NWR at the Rio Grande, NM. By Dirk Hondelmann

Furthermore there are two colour morphs. Both subspecies have blue and white phases, although the blue phase is extremely rare within the Greater Snow Goose (> 0.1%). Both sexes are alike. Birds of the white phase are fully white, except for black primaries on the wing. The dark (blue) phase is dominant. However, birds of each phase prefer to reproduce with individuals of the same phase.

| status in the wild |

The snow goose is the most common goose in the world and listed on the IUCN Red List as Least Concern. Most populations are increasing. The population is estimated to be 10 million Lesser Snow Geese (*C. c. caerulescens*) and < 1 million Greater Snow Geese (*C. c. atlanticus*).

| species reproduction |

Snow geese are adapted to the very short Arctic summer. Shortly after arrival in their breeding ranges, they start to build a simple nest on the ground. Snow geese are monogamous and breed in very dense colonies of up to 4500 pairs per square meter.

A clutch normally consists of 3-4 eggs, with a range of 1-6. The number of eggs increases with the age of the birds, and the nutrient reserves of the female after the flight to the breeding areas. The female incubates alone and after 23-24 days the goslings hatch. 42-50 days later they fledge and usually stay with their parents until the next breeding season starts.

| species habitat |

Snow geese breed in short grass and prefer areas with slightly variable topography like small hills that become clear of snow early. Often they build their nest not far from the coast and near ponds, small lakes or on river islands. In winter they migrate south where they take advantage of agricultural areas.

| species food |

Their diet varies according to their different habitats during the breeding season and winter. In the breeding season they feed mostly on Arctic saltmarsh grass and herbs like *Carex* and *Puccinellia*. On their wintering grounds they mainly feed on seeds, marsh and pasture grasses, rice, wheat, corn, potato or other tuber crops.

| threats |

The population has been increasing for the last few decades. Predators like foxes, wolves and falcons hunt adult birds. The main threats for eggs and goslings are gulls, ravens and skuas.

Climate change has had a high impact on the population of the snow geese. Like other arctic geese, the snow goose benefits from the climate change. The wintering areas are expanding and have induced a rapid increase of their populations.

The overpopulation, especially of the Lesser Snow Goose (*C.c.caerulescens*) in central N-Canada, subjects the breeding grounds to habitat degradation.

The effect of overpopulation on breeding grounds has already been observed to have a negative impact on reproductive success, mainly due to a lack of available grazing opportunities and other food sources. It is likely that this species has reached the carrying capacity of their current breeding grounds and a population decline may be observed in the future.

| conservation |

Due to the existence of several hundred protected areas and a nearly inexhaustible supply of food in their wintering areas, Snow Geese populations have expanded rapidly and some areas have been deemed overpopulated and an increase in hunting bag limits has been initiated in some regions. No further conservation activities are needed at this time.

| find out more |

- IUCN Redlist: www.iucnredlist.org
- Internet Bird Collection: www.ibc.lynxeds.com
- Kear,, J. (2005): Ducks, Geese and Swans Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Kolbe, H. (1999): Die Entenvögel der Welt, Verlag Eugen Ulmer, Stuttgart

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