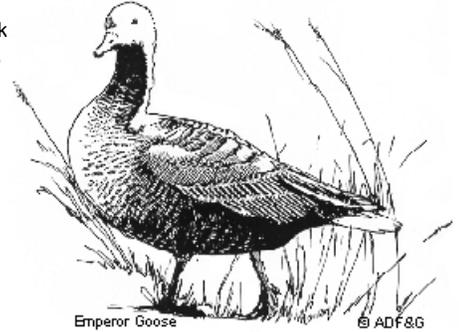




Geese

In addition to Canada geese, (see *Wildlife Notebook Series*, [Canada Geese](#)), four other goose species are commonly found in Alaska—emperor geese, greater white-fronted geese, lesser snow geese, and brant.

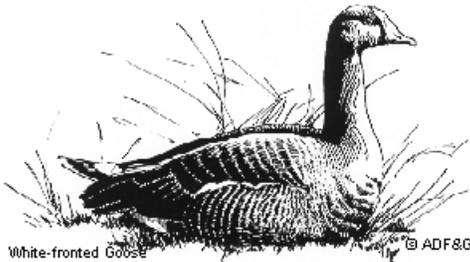
Emperor geese (*Chen canagica*) are thought to be the state's most attractive geese. Their throat and lower neck are black, but the remainder of their neck and head are white. The body is bluish-gray with feather edgings of black and white. Emperor geese have yellow feet and legs and a white tail. They are a medium-sized but chunky goose, weighing 5 to 7 pounds (2.3-3.2 kg). Their major nesting ground is a small area along the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta coast, but some nest along coastal areas of northwest Alaska and in Siberia. Emperor geese lay four to five eggs and are dedicated parents, but first-year survival for the young is relatively low. Nearly all emperors winter under harsh conditions in the Aleutian Islands, on the western and south side of the Alaska Peninsula, and on Kodiak Island. However, stragglers have occurred as far south as California and even Hawaii! Emperor geese are sometimes called "beach geese." As the name implies, they are rarely found far from marine waters. Although emperors rely on marsh plants and berries for food during the summer and early fall, in late fall and winter they feed heavily on seaweeds and animal matter, such as clams and snails. The emperor goose population declined from an estimated 140,000 in 1964 to 42,000 in 1986. Combined with low first-year survival of young and periods of high nest predation, former levels of harvest contributed to the decline. Since 1984, an intensive research and conservation program has promoted an increase to over 71,000 in 1993.



Emperor Goose © ADF&G

Greater white-fronted geese (*Anser albifrons*) are medium-sized, weighing 5 to 7 pounds (2.3-3.2 kg), and generally grayish-brown on the head, neck, back, and wings. They are distinguishable from other dark geese in Alaska by their pink bills, orange legs (young birds have yellow legs), and three-note laughing call. They were officially named for their white faces, acquired in their first winter, although they are commonly called "specklebellies" for the irregular black bars and spots on the breasts of adults. Immatures are white-breasted or have only small, black feathers.

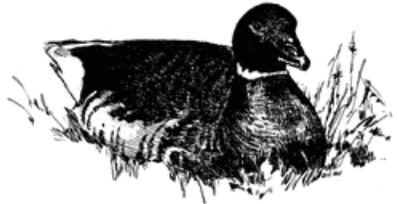
Three populations of white-fronts breed in Alaska. Pacific Flyway white-fronts nest mainly on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and Bristol Bay, and winter from central California to Mexico. This population declined from 400,000 to 100,000 birds during the 1970s but grew to over 295,000 by 1993 under restrictive hunting rules. The **tule white-fronted goose** (*A. a. gambelli*), a larger and darker subspecies, numbers only about 7,000 birds and winters with Pacific birds in central California. Its Alaska breeding range has not yet been fully determined, but the west side of Cook Inlet is a known nesting area.



White-fronted Goose © ADF&G

White-fronts nesting in the remainder of Alaska (none are found in the Aleutian Islands or Southeast Alaska) are part of the Mid-continent Population that breed throughout the western and central arctic of Canada. This population of over 300,000 birds migrates through the central United States and winters in Texas and Mexico. White-fronts are among the first waterfowl to return in the spring. They nest in a variety of habitats near water, usually some distance from other nesting geese, producing clutches that average four to six eggs. Parents and young form strong family units that remain together until the following breeding season. White-fronts leave Alaska early in fall and most are gone by the third week of September.

Brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) are small (2½ to 5 pounds or 1.1-2.3 kg) and compact. They are distantly related to Canada geese. They have a black head and neck, blackish-brown back and wings, darkish breast, and white belly. There is a fluted white "necklace" about midneck (except young of the year). Young birds have light gray edgings on their wing feathers which are absent on adults. Lighter colored Atlantic brant are occasionally seen in Alaska during migration. Brant usually travel in wavy lines low to the water and have a guttural, grating call. Brant have been called the "sea goose" because they are never far from salt water year-round. Most Pacific brant nest in colonies along the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta coast. Scattered nesting also occurs along the northwest coast, arctic slope, and in Siberia, with some moderate-sized colonies in the western Canadian arctic. In the fall, brant from Alaska, Canada, and Russia spend six to nine weeks on Izembek Lagoon and adjacent areas near Cold Bay. There they feed on eel grass and build up fat reserves for migration. In late October or early November, the brant leave Izembek *en masse*, in a non-stop migration across the Gulf of Alaska, mostly to Baja Mexico. Smaller numbers winter in British Columbia, Puget Sound, and a few bays along the Oregon and California coasts. A major shift in brant wintering, from California estuaries to Mexico, occurred by the 1960s. Annually, brant numbers are subject to "boom-and-bust" production and have ranged from 110,000 to 185,000 since 1960, with about half coming from Alaska.



Lesser Snow Goose © ADF&G

Lesser snow geese (*Chen caerulescens caerulescens*) are medium-sized (4 to 7 pounds or 1.8-3.2 kg) and are completely white except for their black wing tips. Adult birds have pink legs and a pink bill, while the young have grayish-brown bills and legs and feathers tending to sooty-gray. Dark-bodied "blue phase" snow geese, common in the eastern Canadian arctic, have been seen rarely in Alaska. There are very few nesting snow geese in Alaska. Most are found on Howe Island, near Prudhoe Bay, in a colony that sprang up in 1971 and has grown to over 450 pairs. Apparently, they were once numerous on the Seward Peninsula and nested at the mouth of the Yukon River, but climatic conditions or unknown factors led to their disappearance. Most snow geese that occur in Alaska are spring and fall migrants, stopping to feed and rest on their routes to and from other nesting grounds. A large portion of the Western Canada Arctic Population, up to 325,000, congregates in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska during September. These birds breed on Banks Island, Northwest Territory, and feed intensively on the Alaska and Yukon coastal plain before flying through Alberta

and Saskatchewan to California for the winter. Snow geese in western Alaska and those found along the Gulf Coast nest on Wrangel Island in Russia, where the population has ranged from 40,000 to 100,000 birds since 1970. Some of these birds apparently use an over-ocean route in fall from the Alaska Peninsula to California. The remainder take a more leisurely coastal route through Southeast Alaska, stopping at the Stikine River Delta, and winter in Washington and British Columbia. In the spring, on their way north, these birds stop over in Cook Inlet and can often be seen near the mouth of the Kenai River. The timing of ice and snowmelt in spring is more critical on both staging and nesting grounds for snows than other geese because they nest in the far north and have a short breeding season. A late spring means that less food may be available at their northern "refueling" areas and that snow cover may delay or completely prevent nesting. In these years, which may occur frequently at high latitudes, few young snow geese will be produced. Besides these four species and the [Canada geese](#), two other

species of geese have been seen in the state. These are the **Ross' goose** (*Chen rossii*), a small version of a snow goose, and the **bean goose** (*Anser fabalis*), an Asiatic relative of the white-fronted goose.

Text: Tom Rothe

Illustration: Bill Ray

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