The Canada goose was once a huge part of southern Illinois' waterfowling life. Today, hunters shift strategy to avoid goose eggs.

Honk Goodbye

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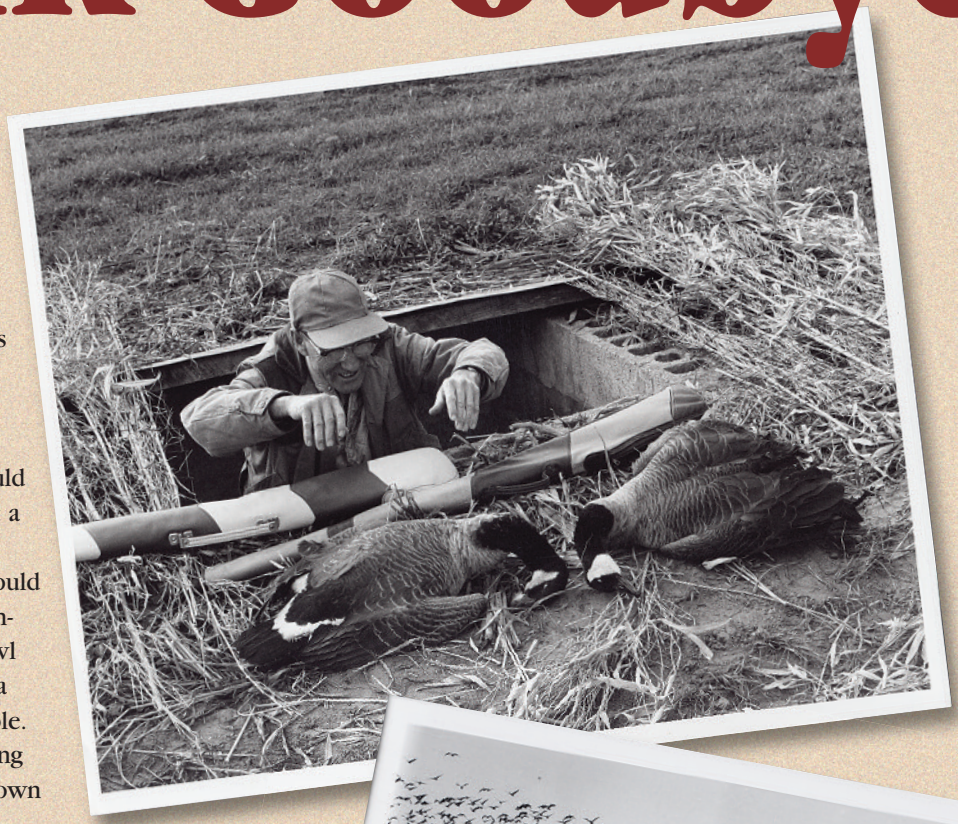


The Illinois tradition of Canada goose hunting was built upon decades of success stories. Peak migrations in southern Illinois reached nearly 1 million birds.

Hunters always knew what to expect. For as long as anyone could remember, when the snows would fly in November, Illinois waterfowlers could count on a reliable holiday standard: a plump Canada goose for the dinner table. Some confident sportsmen would even hunt Thanksgiving eve or morning, their faith in the predictable fowl unshakable. Bringing home a Canada goose for a meal was all but inevitable.

And why not? Canada goose hunting in Illinois was legendary, especially down in the far reaches of southern Illinois where hunting clubs boasted of huge flocks and decades of success stories.

"We were the Canada goose capital of the nation," explained retired Department of Natural Resources waterfowl biologist Dennis Thornburg, an avid southern Illinois hunter. "We wintered more Canada geese than any other place in North America."

It had been that way for more than a generation, with every late autumn heralding waves of honking Canada geese winging their way into Illinois from the frozen north. Chicago hunters would drive or ride the train to destinations along the Illinois River or all the way down to Horseshoe Lake near Cairo or Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge and bag enough honkers to brag.

In southern Illinois, the Canada goose represented nothing less than a trademark identity—with substantial annual revenue. A Canada goose "industry" catering to tourists and sportsmen alike depended upon hundreds of thousands of the migratory waterfowl camping out for the winter in the open waters of deep southern Illinois. So dependant upon the Canada goose were local communities, one southern Illinois tourism agency chose the Canada goose as its official logo.

Even the residents who lived there would flock to refuges just to witness the annual spectacle of hundreds of thousands of Canada geese in one place.

Cupped wings of a descending flock were once a common sight around Canada goose hunting clubs in southern Illinois.

"We used to drive out to Crab Orchard just to see all of the geese," recalled 91-year-old Marjorie Martin of Carbondale, whose late husband Paul would take her for Sunday drives amid fields of geese. "They used to be everywhere. We'd hear them flying over the house all winter long."

And then things in the Mississippi Flyway began to change. Annual migrations south began to dwindle. At first the decline seemed to be a fluke; one bad season could be blamed on a mild winter with ice-free conditions allowing geese to remain in the north.

Then the proverbial bottom fell out. Peak migrations of nearly 1 million Canada geese into southern Illinois were replaced by peak migrations of tens of thousands. Hunting clubs closed. Goose hunters disappeared. Local economies suffered.

As residents of northeastern Illinois are well aware today, the problem wasn't due to a decline in Canada goose populations. The Canada goose flock—including the giant Canada goose once thought to be extinct (*Branta canadensis maxima*)—was still thriving.

So what happened? The end of the once-predictable migration of Canada geese into southern Illinois, western Kentucky and Tennessee is an evolutionary tale of land-use changes, urban expansion, agricultural innovations and once-unimaginable adaptation among geese themselves. Climate change plays a major role as well.

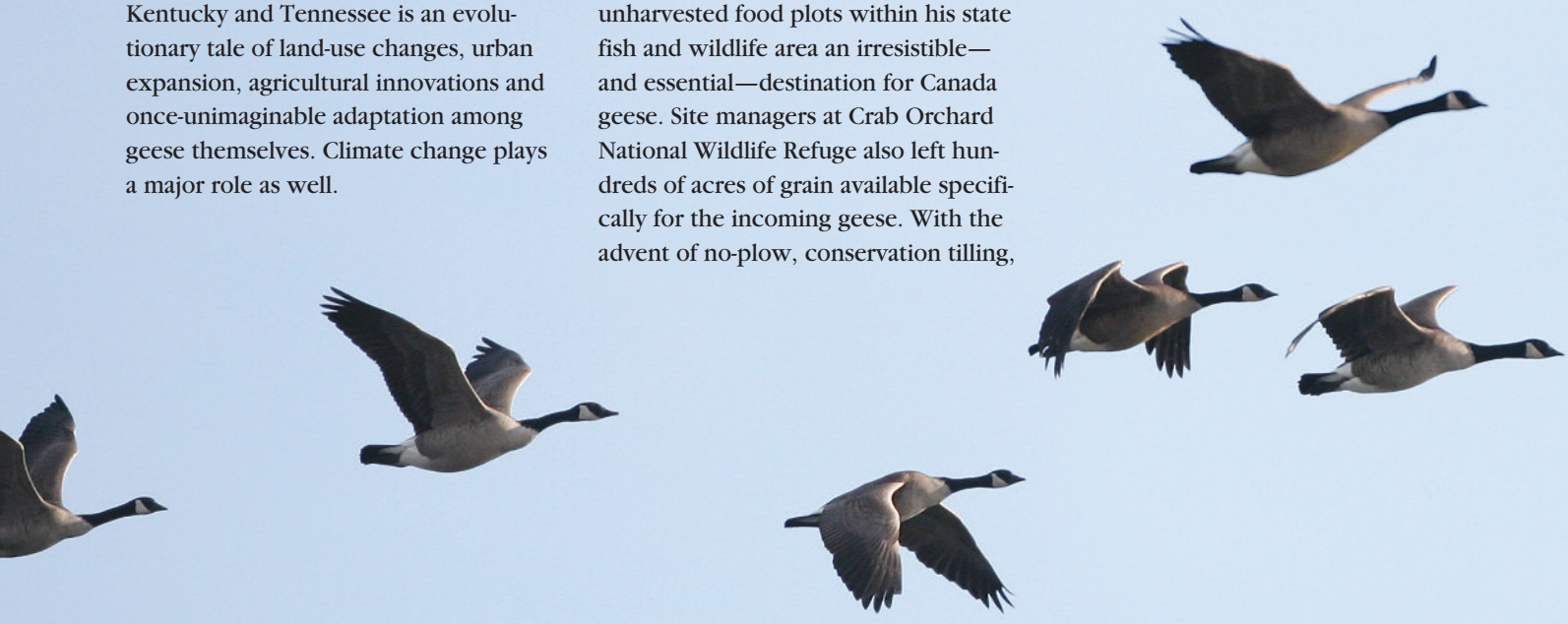
Russell Garrison, retired site superintendent at Horseshoe Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area in Alexander County—where endless flocks of geese once filled the ancient oxbow lake each winter, creating a goose-hunter's paradise, said a major factor behind the abrupt change is the way we farm today. Since Canada geese derive much of their winter food from waste grain left in agricultural fields, the availability of that grain (or lack of it) can either hold a flock in one area—or force it elsewhere.

"Farming has changed," Garrison noted. "Back in 1968 (when I started working at Horseshoe Lake), as soon as they harvested the corn they'd plow the field and turn it all over."

Such agricultural practices throughout the upper Midwest, where loose grain would get buried by the plow each fall, made Garrison's enticing, unharvested food plots within his state fish and wildlife area an irresistible—and essential—destination for Canada geese. Site managers at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge also left hundreds of acres of grain available specifically for the incoming geese. With the advent of no-plow, conservation tilling, loose grain remains on the surface throughout winter. Even amid moderate snow cover, clever Canada geese in the north can dig up the grain and feed themselves, never having to fly south.

And then there's the nature of urban sprawl around Chicago, where grassy golf courses and subdivision fountains—even aerated ponds in industrial parks—supply Canada geese with essential winter needs. Whereas a few Canada geese in a northeastern Illinois park might've been a novel sight in 1978, thousands of overwintering geese were commonplace by 1998.

"They're really adaptable," Garrison added. Seeing geese walking in downtown Chicago during December testifies to the changing nature of this bird that hunters in the south seldom see anymore. "I've almost given up hunting



Southern Illinois once wintered more Canada geese than any other place in North America. Land-use changes, urban expansion and climate change played a role in busting that trend.

for Canada geese," he admitted. "I was used to going out there and, in 30 minutes, you had your geese."

And while long-established goose hunting clubs in southern Illinois were forced to adapt to decreasing Canada goose migrations or cease to exist, a newcomer appeared on the horizon. Snow geese, which had been a rarity, began to migrate by the tens of thousands into the same places Canada geese once landed. A population explosion in their arctic breeding grounds sent hundreds of thousands of these once-uncommon migrants into southern Illinois beginning in the 1990s. Skies at dawn would be filled with the twittering squawks of white birds flying in irregular waves. For hunters lacking Canada geese, the new arrivals suggested a new opportunity.

Yet the new windfall hasn't panned out.

"Snow goose hunting is just so much different than Canada goose hunting," biologist Thornburg pointed out. "They're not as predictable, and so it's really hit or miss when it comes to being able to successfully hunt them."

Unlike the Canada goose, which can be brought in with a good call and a good-looking spread of decoys, snow geese are jittery and unresponsive to hunter's attempts to bring them within range. Consequently, snow goose hunting in Illinois remains a luxury for the few who can afford massive spreads of white decoys in giant fields.

But Illinois still has plenty of ducks, and scores of Canada goose hunting clubs have shifted their hunting strategies to entice migratory ducks—and hunters—back to their properties.

"There's a lot less goose hunting clubs around here than there used to be," Garrison said. "And the ones that are left are now duck clubs."

But not all clubs could afford the duck switch, which requires the construction of duck-attracting lakes and wetlands. Years ago, an ordinary farmer could lease out Canada goose hunting rights to his empty corn fields during winter, since the geese always showed up to pluck waste grain from the fields. Many farmers depended on their hunting business to provide a balanced income throughout the year.

And while occasional, brutal winter weather still sends a few thousand Canada geese into southern Illinois each winter, the trend toward warmer winters in Illinois doesn't bode well for the future of the former Canada goose capital of the world.

"Climate change is a fact," Thornburg stated. "There will still be some Canada geese in southern Illinois. But I don't envision it ever being like it used to be. It's all up to Mother Nature."

In recent years, milder winters with less snow cover allow Canada geese to find food in agricultural fields and remain in the north.