



CANADA GEESE, HARBINGER OF THE SEASONS

For many people the timeless passage of migrating Canada Geese provides a familiar sign of the changing seasons. On crisp autumn evenings the distinct call of a goose flock migrating south across the harvest moon reminds us of the impending winter, while the sight of the first spring flock assures us of warmer days ahead.

The Lake Campbell area is fortunate to have Canada Geese as a familiar sight during both the spring and fall migrations and throughout the breeding season. While Canada Geese may seem very common to us, these birds are by no means ordinary. In fact, in many ways Canada Geese are some of the most unique birds to be found anywhere.

While all Canada Geese in North America are technically the same species, there are actually 11 distinct races of Canada Geese nesting from the Arctic Circle to the central United States. These 11 races of Canada Geese vary widely in size from the "Giant" race which nests throughout the Great Plains of the United States and regularly weighs over 10 pounds to the smallest race, the "Cackling" race that nests in Alaska and weighs about 3 pounds, slightly heavier than a mallard.

All the Canada Geese we see nesting in the Lake Campbell region are part of the "Giant" race, but during both the spring and fall migration, flocks of several of the smaller races regularly pass through eastern South Dakota. These smaller migrant races generally breed in central and northern Canada and Alaska. The call of these smaller races is distinctly higher in pitch than the "Giant" Canada Geese that nest near Lake Campbell.

The "Giants" that nest near Lake Campbell exhibit breeding traits common to all races of Canada Geese. They generally do not mate until they are 2 to 3 years old, however, once a mate is selected they remained paired for life, unlike ducks which generally select a new mate each year. Canada Geese generally lay between 4 and 7 eggs and the females complete all the incubation, usually 25-30 days. Males do not assist with incubation but do help defend the nest and the resulting brood. For "Giants" it usually takes about 70 days for the new goslings to take wing. Even once the goslings begin to fly, Canada Geese generally maintain some semblance of family association. Most of the "Giant" Canada Geese that nest in eastern South Dakota winter in Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska.

So, as you can see, the Canada Geese we so commonly see around Lake Campbell are not so common after all. Their arrival this March will assure us of the new spring ahead and remind us of their many unique qualities.

