

THE AMERICAN BIOLOGY TEACHER



About Our Cover

A large flock of Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) in Lawrence County, Arkansas, in the Mississippi River Delta. The flock as a whole contained over 15,000 individuals, mostly Snow Geese, but also Ross's Geese and Greater White-fronted Geese. Snow Geese breed colonially on tundras in northern Canada and Alaska, ranging from sub- to high-arctic regions. The species migrates along all four of North America's flyways, with large numbers wintering in regions where open habitat is plentiful. One such region is eastern Arkansas, where flocks feed en masse in agricultural fields, searching for grains left over from harvest and other vegetation.

The plumage of a Snow Goose comes in two different color "morphs": a mostly white plumage and a "blue," mostly grayish plumage. Snow Geese mate for life, usually with another goose of the same color morph. Females lay 2–6 eggs in a simple nest scraped out of the earth and lined with down feathers and vegetation. Chicks covered in down and eyes already open, hatch about 24 days after eggs are laid. Chicks can maintain a constant body temperature, without the mother's warmth, within just days of hatching. An adult Snow Goose is 27 to 32 inches, has a wingspan of about 55 inches, and weighs from 3.5 to 7 pounds.

By 1916, populations had been hunted to such low levels that hunting the species was banned. It was not until 1975 that hunting resumed after most populations had made a recovery. Since then, Snow Goose populations have recovered so well that they are damaging the delicate tundra habitat where they breed. Seeing a flock numbering in the ten thousands or even one hundred thousand is not uncommon in major wintering areas throughout the United States. Some of the most famous include areas along the Mississippi River in the south-central United States and Bosque del Apache NWR in New Mexico.

The camera settings for this photo were 1/1600 at f/13, 420mm, ISO 800. The photographer is Mitchell Pruitt, a graduate student in conservation biology at the University of Arkansas, mlpruitt24@yahoo.com.

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