



Snow Birds

Waterfowl species like snow geese migrate south every winter to warm places like North Carolina

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A young snow goose looks skyward as snowflakes drift down from the sky. The first snow of the year happens early in coastal Greenland—it is only August—but the snow is a silent symbol to the geese that it is almost time to begin their long trip south. Although this young goose was born earlier this summer, its mother and father helped it grow strong quickly, and it is ready for its first migration.

The snow falls more regularly as August comes to an end. The geese begin to fly south looking for winter homes where there are large ponds and lakes, plenty of grasses in wide-open fields and lots of other snow geese. This small family of geese begins to fly to Lake Mattamuskeet in North Carolina, stopping in northern Canada and then farther south along eastern North America. They stay for a few days each time they stop, resting and eating, making sure they have enough energy to continue their journey. By early November, our young snow goose has finished its first migration and arrives at what will be its winter home until mid-February, and every winter of its life from now on.

JUVENILE
SNOW GOOSE

OUT OF THE COLD

Of the more than 10,000 species of birds living around the world, almost half regularly travel to a different part of the world each year. Migration, or long-distance travel from a summer home to a winter home, can take a long time and a lot of energy, but birds big and small migrate every year, searching for food or a place to have young. Birds like snow geese travel thousands of miles south in the winter to find a warmer climate where grasses are available to eat. Each spring, they travel back north to build nests and raise young.

Each winter, parts of eastern North Carolina become home to thousands of large white birds. Giant flocks of snow geese make their winter homes in areas like Lake Mattamuskeet and the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Snow geese like these areas because there are large ponds and lakes with nearby fields filled with plants like grasses, corn and soy to eat.

STAYING TOGETHER

While in their homes, these birds group together for protection from predators and warmth at night. Each morning, thousands of geese take off from their evening roosts, where they have slept in big, floating groups on the surface of a pond or lake. A large, noisy, flapping white cloud of birds makes its way across the sky to nearby open fields. These geese will spend their days foraging, looking for the tastiest bites of plants.

As sunset creeps closer, it is as if the geese hear a secret cue to take off and head back toward their roosts on the water. Any spectators on the ground are treated to a unique winter spectacle: Thousands of snow geese flying high above the ground, following one another to the water. The geese are anything but quiet, calling back and forth to each other, communicating where to go and ensuring they remain together.

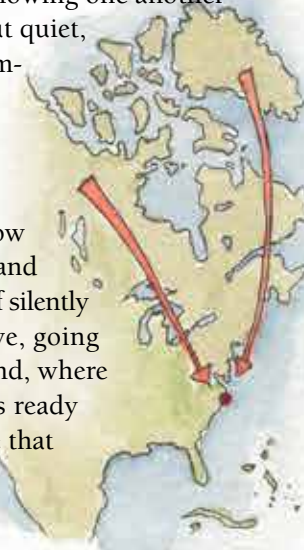
HOME AGAIN

Migrating geese in North Carolina follow this routine until the days grow warm and long enough for their journey north. As if silently being called back home, the geese leave, going to northern Canada or coastal Greenland, where the snow has slowed and the habitat is ready to feed them and the new, young geese that will hatch next year.

Get Outside

Many different species of birds, including waterfowl, migrate to North Carolina in the winter. Most notable are the different species of ducks, like Northern shovellers, buffleheads, ruddy ducks and hooded mergansers. Between November and February, many of these species can be seen on small lakes and ponds across North Carolina. If you live near a park or natural area with a lake or a pond, visit one during the winter and look for some birds that you may not normally see.

At first, you might only see the tail end of a duck sticking out as it dabbles underwater looking for aquatic vegetation to eat. If you are patient, it will pop up in a few minutes and you can get a better look at the bird. If you visit these areas during different seasons, you'll start to become familiar with our "snow birds" that are here only in the winter.



MENTAL MAPPING ACTIVITY

How do birds that migrate find their way each year and know where to go? Young birds often learn the path to travel by following older birds, which helps them build a mental map so they can find their way back in the future.

What is a mental map? A mental map is a way to organize information, in this case a path and anything noticeable along the way. It is how you may remember to get from your bed to the door even when the lights are turned out, or if your eyes are closed.

Let's explore building a MENTAL MAP

1. Pick an area of your house that you are familiar with, like your living room. Place an object you can easily find, like a soccer ball or basketball, in a different room.
2. Get some blank paper and sketch where you will be starting (the room you started in) and a path to get to the object. Try to make a note or draw anything that stands out, such as a chair or couch, a hallway or doorways.
3. With the help of an adult or a friend, close your eyes or blindfold yourself. Use the mental map you created when drawing your path. Remember what you need to pass, which direction and how far away the ball is. Have your friend or adult help you navigate that path so you don't fall or run into any furniture or walls.
4. Repeat the same path a couple of times to see if it gets easier. Try the path in reverse, or a new, more complicated path. You'll become an expert in mental maps!