



Atlantic Flyway Light Goose Conservation Order Update

History

The Greater Snow Goose is an Arctic-nesting goose species whose wintering grounds are largely confined to the Atlantic Flyway. As of the 1960's, the population was small, estimated at less than 40,000 individuals, with some hunting allowed only in Canada. Harvest in the U.S. was not open until 1975, when the population surpassed 100,000 individuals (Lefebvre et al. 2017). In the 1980's, Greater Snow Geese began shifting their wintering distribution north and using inland habitats for foraging in agricultural fields. For multiple reasons, mortality from hunting declined and allowed for rapid population growth. The population reached levels that caused degradation of sensitive Arctic tundra habitats due to overgrazing, as well as increasing amounts of agricultural damage on their wintering grounds in states like Delaware, Maryland and New Jersey (Lefebvre et al. 2017).

Following this population increase to an estimated high of more than one million birds, special conservation measures were implemented in Canada in 1999 and in the U.S. in 2009. These conservation measures were enacted through establishment of the Light Goose Conservation Order (Light Goose FEIS 2007; note that 'light geese' includes Lesser Snow Geese, and Ross's Geese in addition to Greater Snow Geese). As of 2026, eight states in the Atlantic Flyway held the Conservation Order including Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.

The intent of the Conservation Order is to reduce and stabilize light goose population levels. The order authorized the use of electronic calls and unplugged shotguns, eliminated daily bag limits on light geese, and allowed shooting hours to continue until one-half hour after sunset (Light Goose FEIS 2007). The authorization of the Conservation Order was designed to reduce adult survival rates beyond what could be achieved alone through harvest during regular federal hunting season frameworks. The Conservation Order is an important management tool to reach light goose population objectives.

Current Population Status

The current Greater Snow Goose population objective is between 500,000 and 750,000 geese (Atlantic Flyway Management Plan 2009). Since 1965, there has been a spring survey for Greater Snow Geese in the St. Lawrence Region of Quebec, where the majority of the population stages during migration and can be feasibly counted. This survey is the current means to estimate the Greater Snow Goose population and monitor trends over time to inform management. The preliminary 2026 estimate of the Greater Snow Goose population is 515,000 geese $\pm$ 29,600 (95% CI; Figure 1). The 2025 estimate was 428,000 $\pm$ 13,000, below the population objective for the first time since 1993. The population has been declining since the 2010's and at or below the lower threshold of the population objective for the last two years.

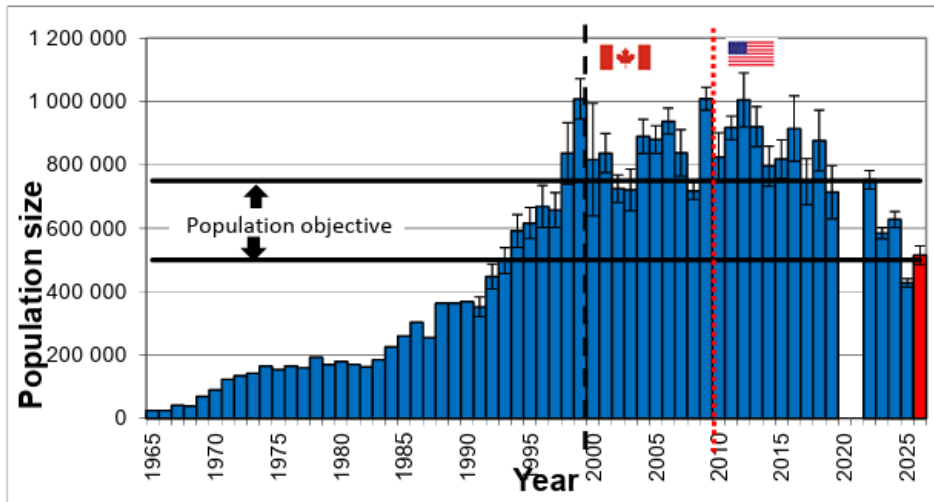


Figure 1. Estimated population size of the Greater Snow Goose according to the Canadian Wildlife Service Spring survey, 1965-2026 except for 2020 and 2021 where no survey was done due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The black dotted line indicates the year when the special conservation measures were implemented in Québec (1999). The red dotted line indicates the year when the Conservation Order were implemented in the United States (2009).

Questions and Answers

What is the cause of the decline in the Greater Snow Goose population?

There are likely multiple causes of the decline in the population. Liberalized regular seasons and bag limits as well as the Conservation Order has allowed for harvest and hunting pressure for nine months of the year since 1999 in Canada and 2009 in the United States. The Conservation Order has direct effects in the form of hunting mortality but also indirect effects of disturbance that may reduce body condition of breeding adults and subsequent breeding output. Since 2021, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has circulated amongst wild birds and in particular, wintering states such as Delaware and Pennsylvania have documented over 9,700 Greater Snow Geese mortalities attributed to HPAI in winter 2024-2025 and 2025-2026. Conditions on the breeding grounds such as snow and ice cover may also impact breeding success.

Has the Conservation Order been eliminated in the Atlantic Flyway?

No. The Conservation Order has been suspended for 2027 after agreement from the eight participating hunt states, Quebec and Ontario. The population was below the lower population objective of 500,000 in 2025, and within the population objective range of 500,000-750,000 in 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2026. The intent of the Conservation Order is to aggressively reduce the population of Greater Snow Geese, and that is currently not necessary. We have suspended the Conservation Order, rather than terminated it, because the population may surpass the upper population objective in the future. The Conservation Order is a unique and useful tool in managing the light goose population.

What will future light goose hunting seasons in the Atlantic Flyway look like?

The regular light goose hunting season will remain a liberal, 107-day season with a 25-bird daily bag limit, unless there are continued declines in the population. The conservation order will be reassessed if the population nears or exceeds the upper threshold of the population objective.

Literature Cited

Atlantic Flyway Council. Management plan for greater snow geese in the Atlantic Flyway. 2009.

Lefebvre, J., G. Gauthier, J-F. Giroux, A. Reed, E. Reed, and L. Belanger. The greater snow goose *Anser caerulescens atlanticus*: Managing an overabundant population. *Ambio* 2017 46:2 (S262-S274).

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