

Atlantic Brant (*Branta bernicla hrota*)

Brant are small, dark colored geese that undertake one of the longest migrations of any waterfowl. The Atlantic Brant (one of three recognized subspecies of Brant) might travel up to 7000 miles by way of Hudson Bay to their estuarine and coastal wintering grounds which go from Cape Cod to North Carolina and include the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary. On average, 70% of the total Atlantic Brant population overwinter in New Jersey with the next largest group settling in on the south shore of Long Island.



Brant are similar in shape to their close cousin the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) but they are smaller (3 pounds or less), darker in color and have shorter necks. The Atlantic Brant has a black head, neck, breast, bill, and black feet. Their backs are dark brown and their chests are white-gray in color. Mature Atlantic Brant appear to have a white ring around their neck. Males tend to be slightly larger than the females, but they look alike. In flight they beat their wings rapidly, similar to ducks.

The Atlantic Brant that overwinter in our area can be found, mostly in large groups, on the bays, tidal flats, salt marshes and uplands adjacent to the salt marshes of the Harbor Estuary and in nearby coastal areas. They have a specially adapted gland that allows them to drink salt water and are rarely seen in fresh water. During the overwintering period, which begins in late fall and ends in spring, the Atlantic Brant feeds on vegetation. Eelgrass is preferred but they will eat sea lettuce (*Ulva lactuca*), cord grass, and cultivated grass. These additional food sources are a relatively new adaptation. An eelgrass wasting disease in the 1930's killed much of the eelgrass along the Atlantic Coast of the United States. This led to a drastic decrease in the Atlantic Brant population. Since then, populations have recovered because the Brant was able to adapt to the other food sources. Of late, Atlantic Brant have taken to feeding on fields, lawns and in other cultivated areas throughout their range but especially in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, likely due to development and loss of estuarine feeding grounds. It is especially important that food is plentiful during the overwintering period. The Atlantic Brant needs to store energy to fuel its long trip back to its breeding grounds especially since once it arrives there, little food is available at first. In fact, females use nutrients stored in their body fat to produce eggs and to sustain them during incubation.

Atlantic Brant mate for life unless one is lost. They begin breeding at about three years old. Brant migrate to the Arctic Circle and beyond during our summer months to breed. Throughout their breeding season, the Atlantic Brant can be found in the Central Canadian Arctic from Greenland to north of the Barents Sea. Females lay between 4-6 eggs in a bowl shaped depression lined with down on the ground. The eggs take about 24 days to hatch. Once hatched, the male assumes the lead in herding the brood with the female following close behind. Young Brant feed on marine invertebrates, mosquito

larvae, and various plants. As they age their diet shifts to almost all plant matter consisting of sea lettuce, eelgrass, and grass.

Atlantic Brant are hunted as sport under strict regulations in both New York and New Jersey. To keep the population stable, hunting is managed through the use of waterfowl surveys and hunting regulations. At the current time, the main threats to the Atlantic Brant are predation, severe weather conditions during the breeding season and, in our area, industrialization, development and pollution in the overwintering grounds.



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