

Tim Herd's

Watchable Wildlife Guide

wildlife observation in the right place at the right time

Week of Nov. 19-25, 2006

Happy landings

Cruising at an altitude of 1000 feet, the long, curved front of migrating snow geese is an impressive sight. From their perspective, the grand view of coursing waterways leads them onward for hours at a time. But when it's time for a rest stop, they pull up their chests, brake with their wings, and lower their legs for a watery landing.



Photo by Ty Smedley

As they alight, they employ one of two curiously different landing techniques. They may float softly earthward, until with a few quick wingbeats, they settle quietly and calmly. Or, alternatively, they stage a helter-skelter, mad-dash, zigzagging, honking-all-the-way fall-from-the-sky splashdown: quite the sight!

The impressive snow goose is now returning from its Arctic Circle breeding grounds to spend its winter resting and feeding in freshwater and coastal wetlands. Look for two individual color variations in the large sociable flocks: the dominant white with black wingtips that inspired its name, and the variable slate-brown, formerly considered a separate species known as the blue goose.

WHERE TO OBSERVE

Gray Lodge Wildlife Area, Calif.
Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve, Kan.
Ballard Wildlife Management Area, Ky.
Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, La.
Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Md.
Yazoo NWR, Miss.
Squaw Creek NWR, Mo.
Mackay Island NWR, N.C.
Alkali Lake Sanctuary, N.D.
Malheur NWR, Ore.
Narragansett Bay National Reserve, R.I.
Back Bay NWR, Va.

LOOK FOR

large goose
all white with black wingtips; or dark gray body with white head and neck
pink-orange bill with black "grin patch"
pink-orange legs
webbed feet

LISTEN FOR

harsh, descending *whonk* or *heenk*

Snow goose

Chen caerulescens

24-30 inches; wingspan: 49-53 inches

Habitat: marshes, wet grasslands, coastal wetlands, tundra (breeding)

Range Key: ■ Breeding ■ Migrating ■ Nonbreeding

