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Open Ocean Roosting of Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*)

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The Ocean City, Maryland, Christmas Bird Count has been conducted in late December every year since 1948. For the first two decades of the count, an average of 200 Snow Geese were counted each year with a range of 0–2000. All were presumed to be the Greater Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens atlantica*) which wintered in and around Assateague Island and the Sinepuxent Bay to its immediate west. Starting in 1973, the count saw a major influx of geese, with 7710 geese being counted. Over the ensuing 30 years, the numbers of Snow Geese ranged from 10,000 to 66,000 and averaged about 30,000 in the 1990s. Almost all of these birds were considered to be Greater Snow Geese, with the numbers of blue morph birds representing about 0.25% of the total geese counted. A number of Ross's Geese (*Anser rossii*) has also been counted among the large flocks since 1992.

The bulk of these geese during those 30 years were observed feeding in the winter wheat (*Triticum* L. spp.) and other fields from the western outskirts of West Ocean City, west to the Pocomoke River on the boundary of Worcester and Wicomico Counties. A private marsh, known as Jenkins Pond, became one of the primary roosts for these geese during these years as no hunting and limited access was then in force. Jenkins Pond is located about 6 km (4 mi) southeast of Berlin and about 5 km (3 mi) west of Sinepuxent Bay. In 2002, this wetland changed hands and became a private hunting preserve. The geese were hazed repeatedly the ensuing winter when only 9000 geese were counted in the whole circle (December 2002), with almost none roosting at Jenkins Pond, compared to 51,000 counted a year earlier in December 2001.

On 27 December 2003, the night before the count, I noted 100 to 200 Snow Geese passing over West Ocean City shortly after dark and heading west. I did not consider the flight of any importance until the next day. A new daytime roost site for Snow Geese was discovered by Joseph R. Jehl and the author's count party working at the Ocean City Inlet. The roost was due east of, and just over the horizon (~6–7 km [~4 mi]) from, the Inlet. Many thousands of birds clearly roosted there all day. They were only visible from the Inlet when a boat ran through the flock and for a few minutes, thousands of white geese could be seen lifting up from the water before settling back down to the surface of the ocean. These repeated incursions by the high-speed boats may have been hunters, but no evidence was available to confirm this hypothesis.

No white geese flocks were seen passing overhead in the immediate area of Ocean City by the couple dozen count observers that were afield from approximately 0500 until 1730 hours on 28 December 2003. Darkness fell at about 1730. By 1800 and until 2000 hours, many thousands of geese could easily be seen and heard flying west over the lights of Ocean City in long waving white lines heading inland. A gross estimate of a minimum of 24,000 geese passing over Ocean City was made, but that made no account for flocks that may have been passing to the south or the north of Ocean City that evening.

It was not clear what the actual daily schedule of these birds was, nor was it totally clear the purpose of roosting in daylight on the open ocean and then flying inland after dark. The open fields and other places inland were not searched by any observers later that evening, nor were local farmers or hunters asked what they were seeing or hearing during the night in the region. It seems unlikely that the flocks of geese were simply shifting roost sites after spending about 12 hours or more on the open ocean without feeding. Gauthier et al. (1988) report similar field feeding in Greater Snow Geese in Quebec, with approximately half the day spent feeding and the other half in roosting or other activities.

At the time, the waterfowl season for white geese was open in Maryland. I had observed a small number of hunters that were working the large fields between Ocean City and the west side of the county on 27 December 2003. One must wonder if these geese were roosting on the open ocean to avoid the daytime hunters and also if they spent stormy days out on the open ocean. Mowbray et al. (2000) make no mention of the use of the open ocean for roosting. No such roosting flocks on the ocean were noted in any subsequent Ocean City Christmas Bird Counts through 2016.

The weather during those two days (27–28 December 2003) was relatively mild with only a moderate wind. The moon had been full about 5–6 days prior to this set of observations. Temperatures ranged from about -2° to 10° C (28° to 50° F), while the winds were calm to 6 km/hr (4 mi/hr) from the east. No fog or precipitation was present during the period.

LITERATURE CITED

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