

Wild Wednesday 23 Sept 2020 by Walt Anderson

If the question is “goose,” what is the Answer?

Autumn is here, a time when the cries of wild geese overhead coincide with leaves turning and cattail fuzz erupting from the marshes in clouds of fluff. You can hear geese flying through the Dells early in the morning as they leave their overnight accommodations at Watson Lake and fly out to forage in fields, as they are great grass-mowers. That sometimes gets them in trouble in city parks and golf courses, for they are notable for converting soft grass into goose grease, giving them a reputation as “loosy goosie” (goose watchers know what this really means, even though dictionaries define it as “relaxed; calm; unperturbed”).

If you are new to Prescott, you might think this is a continuing link to the past, but until Prescott acquired water rights from the Chino Irrigation District and thereby could keep water in Watson and Willow Reservoirs year-round, you would not have experienced this autumn phenomenon here at all. Migrating geese discovered the reservoirs once water was retained, and some stayed to breed. Now there are Canada Geese here year-round, and most of us are glad of it.

Migrant Canada Geese do join the residents here in fall and winter, as do other “Canadian geese” (not the right name for our common species, as it simply refers to a goose that came from Canada) like the Greater White-fronted Goose and the Snow Goose.

Geese are grazers, as their high compressed beaks suggest (in contrast to the depressed bills of most ducks; I think if I had a bill like a shoveler, I’d be depressed too).

People sometimes buy goslings at Easter—truly adorable little birds—but they grow up into rather aggressive and sometimes unpleasant domestic geese, so people release these unwanted birds into our lakes, where they breed and may compete with native species. I suppose they are lucky not to end up on a Thanksgiving platter. They simply don’t have the grace and elegance of our wild geese.

The abundance of water birds, raptors, shorebirds, and the like at Watson and Willow Lakes have earned this site designation as an Important Bird Area. This is a feather in the cap of the City, as there are not all that many in Arizona. I suggest you go out there and take a gander.

The lakes themselves are a product of narrow canyons in the Granite Dells that created conditions where dams could be built. Intensively developed as parklands for recreation, these reservoirs complement the wilder parts of the Dells. All of this is worthy of being protected as a greater Granite Dells Regional Park and Preserve, and committed volunteers work on this vision every day as a legacy for the future.



Canada Geese taking flight against the spectacular backdrop of the Granite Dells.



Geese are strong, graceful, and usually noisy flyers. V formations save energy, as all but the lead bird get some drafting advantage.



Two Canada Geese ("honkers") taking off from a patch of cocklebur.



A family of Canada Geese at the edge of Watson Woods.



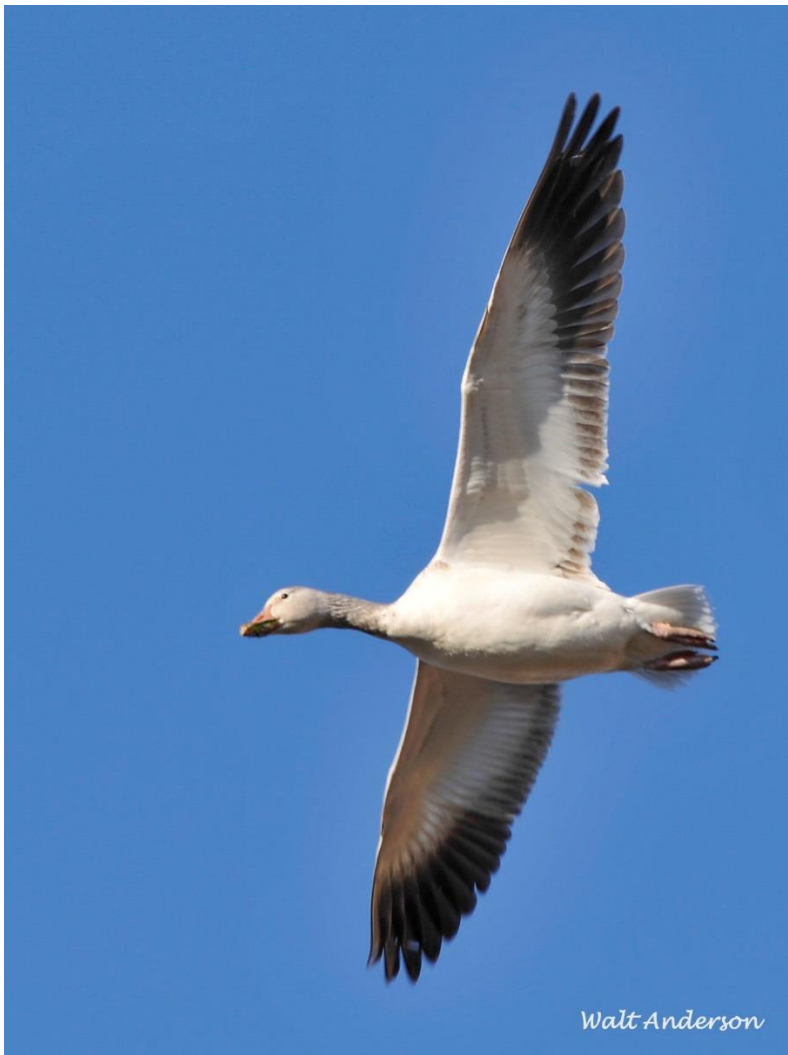
Canada Goose in a reflective pose.



The compressed bill of a goose is designed for grazing, unlike the depressed bills of most ducks.



Snow Geese flying through the Dells.



The outer flight feathers (primaries, or pinions) of a Snow Goose are blackish, as the melanin resists wear. You see this often in large, strong-flying birds like White Pelicans or gulls.



Snow Geese have a “grinning patch” on the bill. The rust stain comes from iron oxides in the muds where they were feeding in the Arctic.



Immature Snow Goose.



Greater White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons*, at Watson Lake. This is another wild species that breeds in the Arctic and migrates south for the winter. Its European cousin, the Graylag Goose (*Anser anser*) has been domesticated, and we see some fat-bodied domesticates year-round at Watson Lake.



Close-up of a domestic goose at Watson Lake. If you have goose questions, then here's the Anser.



The domestic geese have different color forms created through selective breeding. We see odd-colored ducks on local waters too, and those are domesticated forms of the Mallard. In Prescott Valley, there are some domestic forms of the Muscovy Duck, whose wild ancestors still live in the New World tropics.



Breeders of domesticates have often created white forms. Nevertheless, they are no stronger or more patriotic than other colors of geese. White Supremacy is not the Anser.