

Competing interests for birds and their lovers along the Pacific flyway

By Felicity Barringer, New York Times

WILLOWS – These are good days to be a snow goose on the Pacific flyway. The water in the rice fields is at an ideal depth for snacking on marsh plants. A bit of grain is left over from the harvest around the Northern California city of Chico, which is gearing up for its annual Snow Goose Festival.

Just past sunset, thousands of the geese rise as one from the marshes here, a primal force riding a soft thunder of black-tipped wings.

There is just one problem with this picture, which results from nearly a century of efforts to sustain the plump white birds along their migratory paths. From the Arctic tundra to the marshes of Chesapeake Bay, snow geese have become far too much of a good thing over the past two decades, crowding out smaller species and destroying their own summer nesting grounds with their nibbling.

In places where the birds sojourn in the winter, Missouri and Mississippi River farmers consider them pests that not only eat grains but also peck and claw at plant roots. In Chincoteague Bay in Maryland, they turned stretches of marsh into open water.

Whether the cause of this population explosion is a warming trend in Northern breeding grounds, an increase in the food supply in their winter homes or a combination, few would dispute that there are too many birds in all five groups of snow geese that migrate along North America's flyways. "Nationally, snow geese numbers are increasing exponentially,"

said Dan Frisk, the manager of the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge here. "They are destroying their own habitat."

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