

INAPPROPRIATE ESCAPE BEHAVIOUR OF CANADA GEESE WITH YOUNG

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On the afternoon of 20 May 1990 I disturbed a Canada Goose from a point of land on Hastings Lake (about 40 km e of Edmonton). As the goose took to water its young, which swam in a row ahead of the adult, became visible and it became evident that they were led by another parent which swam so completely submerged that only the brownish hump of its back was visible above the water. I watched the family through 8x40 binoculars as they swam quickly until they were at least 60 m away from me. During this time the submerged adult never raised its head above water to take a breath while the nearer adult swam with neck very erect and was evidently keeping an eye on me.

Bent states that when a family party of these birds moves over water the gander usually leads the procession.¹ I believe this was not the case in this instance, because the rear bird was large and was evidently standing on guard when I first became aware of the family. Furthermore, the posture assumed by the almost submerged adult resembled that adopted by incubating geese when they are aware of being observed; they lay their head and neck flat along the ground so that only the hump of their backs remains conspicuous.

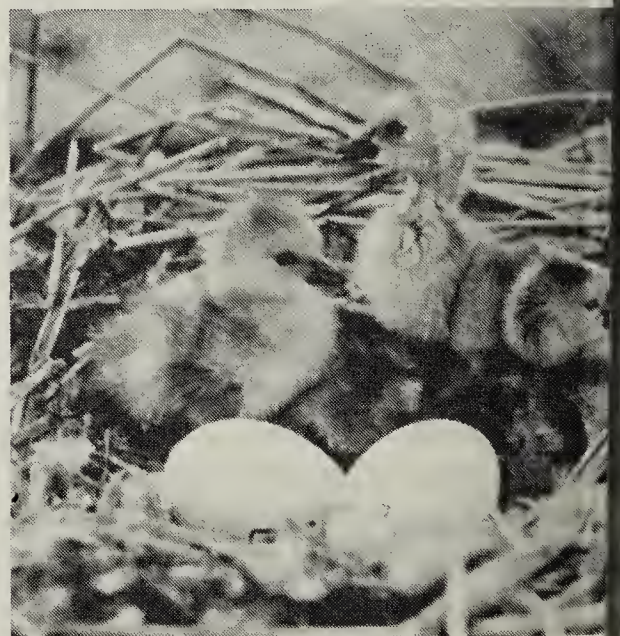
This behaviour is comparable yet different from an observation by P.A. Taverner, reported by Bent. Taverner described a goose family pursued on a lake by a motor boat. The geese swam fast and arranged themselves in a single row, one parent leading, the other bringing up the string of young from the rear. The adults swam with necks outstretched and laid them flat on the water. From the

distance of the observer they looked like a floating stick and would never impress the casual eye as a family of Canada Geese.

This behaviour was evidently successful in making the goose family inconspicuous. My observation, on the other hand, shows the limitations of instinctive behaviour; the strenuous underwater exertions by the leading goose (whatever sex) were annulled by the rear adult which swam most conspicuously.

During the same weekend I came across another instance of inappropriate instinctive behaviour. Beavers which had recently reinvaded the cattail marsh on my acreage had not only added fresh mud to the dam at the outlet of the pond but had done the same at the only inflow of water from an adjacent smaller pond.

¹ BENT, A.C. 1925. Life histories of North American wild fowl, Part two. Smithsonian Inst., U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 6. Dover Reprint, N.Y. 1962.



Goslings at nest

R.E. Geese