

# Species Fact Sheets

**Order:** Anseriformes  
**Scientific Name:** *Chen caerulescens*

**Family:** Anatidae  
**Common Name:** Snow Goose

**AZA Management:**  Green  Yellow  Red  None

**Photo (Male):**



**Photo (Female):**



## NATURAL HISTORY:

**Geographic Range:** Europe  Asia  North America  Neotropical   
 Africa  Australia  Other Occasional presence in N. Asia

**Habitat:** Forest  Desert  Grassland  Coastal   
 Riverine  Montane  Other Tundra

**Circadian Cycle:** Diurnal  Crepuscular  Nocturnal  Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Cold Tolerance:** To 70° F  To 60° F  To 50° F  To 40° F   
 To 30° F  To 20° F  Other  Can be maintained outdoors as long as they have access to moving water to keep their feet from freezing

**Heat Tolerance:** To 30° F  To 50° F  To 70° F  To 90° F   
 To 110° F  Other  Can be kept outdoors as long as water and shade are available

**Diet:** Frugivore  Carnivore  Piscivore  Insectivore   
 Nectivore  Omnivore  Folivore  Other (Add Below)

**Captive Dietary Needs:**

Primarily grazers in the wild. Captive snow geese can be maintained on commercial duck feed.

**Life Expectancy in the Wild:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

**Life Expectancy in Captivity:** Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

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## BREEDING INFORMATION:

**Age at Sexual Maturity:** Males: 2-4 Years Females: 2-4 Years

**Courtship Displays:** Primarily monogamous, often for life. Courtship consists of the pair facing each other and stretching their necks upward rapidly, in unison.

**Nest Site Description:** The nest is constructed by the female. It starts off as a simple scrape, eventually acquiring a lining of down feathers and vegetation. Nests that are in more exposed locations tend to be more massive, sometimes measuring 1-2 meters across. Nests are built on dry land close to water, sometimes on islands. The female may make several tentative scrapes before finally committing to one. Snow geese sometimes nest near snowy owls, possibly as a deterrent to predators.

**Clutch Size, Egg Description:** The 2-6 eggs are creamy white, but stain easily (it is sometimes possible to rank the eggs in age by how dirty they are). Eggs measure approximately 8 centimeters long by 5 centimeters wide.

**Incubation Period:** 24 Days

**Fledgling Period:** 42-50 Days

**Parental Care:** The female incubates the eggs while the male stands guard, though he may leave on occasion, leaving the female alone to defend the nest. Both parents assist in the care of the chicks after they hatch.

**Chick Development:** Chicks are born well-developed with their eyes open and their bodies covered in down. They are able to follow their parents shortly after birth and grow quickly, with male chicks tending to grow faster than females.

## CAPTIVE HABITAT INFORMATION:

**Social Structure in the Wild:** Large Flocks

**Social Structure in Captivity:** Small Flocks

**Minimum Group Size:** 2

**Maximum Group Size:** As many as the enclosure can comfortably house.

**Compatible in Mixed Species Exhibits:** Yes **Comments:** Can be housed with a variety of species, including other waterfowl, ungulates, large rodents

**Optimal Habitat Size:** 500 Square Feet per Pair

**Management Challenges:** Unlike most waterfowl species, snow geese will nest colonially – aggression is less of an issue than for many waterfowl. Because of their size, snow geese are often maintained in open-air, outdoor enclosures instead of enclosed aviaries. Their pools and food sources tend to attract native wild birds, such as Canada geese and mallards, which become potential disease vectors and competitors for

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food. In some locations, wild snow geese may be attracted to the enclosure by the presence of captive snow geese.

### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Snow geese measure 69-83 centimeters in length with a wingspan of 138 centimeters and a weight of 1.6-3.3 kilograms. There are two recognized subspecies. The greater snow goose (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) is slightly larger than the lesser (nominate), but the difference can be difficult to appreciate if the birds are seen in the field. The greater snow goose only occurs in one color variety – white. The lesser subspecies is more common in captivity.

The lesser snow goose, in contrast, comes in two color variants. Most common is the white phase, with all white plumage save for black wingtips. The so-called blue phase, on the other hand, has a white face, a slate-blue or gray body, and white underneath the tail. In both phases, the bill is pink, often with black lines around the edge, sometimes resembling lips, and pink legs. The color differences are due to a single gene variant, with the blue phase being partially dominant over the white phase. A snow goose will display its adult coloration at the time of its hatching. Birds tend to choose a mate of the same color phase. Males and females look alike, though the males are usually larger.

Snow geese breed on the Arctic tundra. Prior to nesting the female consumes food at an enormous rate, feeding for up to 18 hours a day, but she largely stops at the time of laying. Nests are often found in association with those of snowy owls, and it has been noted that nests found near owls tend to have higher success rates; this has led to the theory that the geese rely on owls as a predator deterrent. Potential nest predators include gulls, skuas, ravens, and foxes; adults have few predators, but may be taken by bears or wolves. After the chicks hatch, they follow the parents on foot until fledged, sometimes walking for tens of kilometers. They fledge at 42-50 days of age.

Snow geese migrate south in the winter. Leaving their nesting grounds in March, they may travel as far south as central Mexico. During their migration, they are found in wetlands and agricultural areas. Their willingness to utilize farmers' fields has enabled their population to grow tremendously in recent years, and they are one of the most abundant waterfowl species in North America; there is some concern that they may be becoming overly abundant, overgrazing their tundra nesting grounds. Migrating snow geese gather in immense flocks.

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