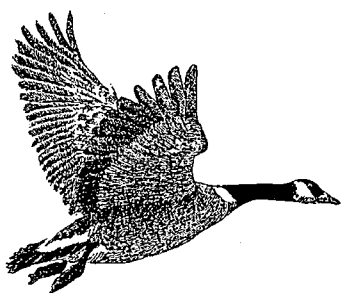
A BREEDING PAIR SURVEY OF CANADA GEESE IN NORTHERN QUEBEC - 2004



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Status of Canada geese (Branta canadensis) in the Atlantic flyway was traditionally monitored by mid-winter surveys (Hindman and Ferrigno 1990). However, the dramatic increase in resident (i.e., non-migratory) Canada geese and mixing of resident and migrant geese on wintering areas has seriously reduced the value of mid-winter surveys for monitoring individual populations. Therefore, emphasis of population monitoring has shifted to surveys on breeding areas, where population affiliation is more obvious.

During the 1960's, aerial surveys identified the Ungava Peninsula in northern Quebec as the primary nesting area for Atlantic flyway Canada geese (Kaczynski and Chamberlain 1968). Malecki and Trost (1990) used a more quantitative approach to estimate the number of breeding pairs throughout the boreal forest and Ungava Peninsula of northern Quebec in 1988. Their findings confirmed that the highest densities were located along the coastal areas of Ungava Bay and Hudson Bay. In 1993, an annual survey was begun in northern Quebec using methods developed by Malecki and Trost (1990) (Bordage and Plante 1993). The objective of this survey is to monitor the status of the migrant population by estimating the number of breeding pairs. This report presents the results of the 2004 breeding grounds survey.

Acknowledgments: This survey was cooperatively funded by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Atlantic Flyway Council. Jean Rodrigue (CWS) and Bill Harvey (MD DNR) served as observers. John Bidwell (USFWS) served as pilot. Peter May and Alix Gordon (Kuujjuaq, Makivik Corporation), Carol Peddicord (Wildlife Management Institute), and Aliva Tulugak (Povungnituk) provided logistical support. Others assisting in various phases of the survey included: Kathryn Dickson (CWS), Richard Cotter (CWS), Jerry Serie (USFWS), and Larry Hindman (MD DNR).

STUDY AREA

The survey was conducted in northern Quebec, north of 51° latitude and west of 67° longitude (Figure 1). The survey is stratified based on Malecki and Trost's (1990) modification of northern Quebec's ecoregions (Gilbert et al. 1985). The regions have been described by Malecki and Trost (1990) and Bordage and Plante (1993). Regions 1-3 comprise the area known as the Ungava Peninsula (Figure 1). Region 1 is comprised of inland tundra, with much of the surface covered by granitic bedrock. Region 2 consists mainly of flat coastal tundra, characterized by low relief and numerous ponds and lakes. Region 3 is taiga, with stunted black spruce and tamarack in protected valleys. Elevations range from 100 - 400 m in region 1, 0 - 200 m in region 2, and 100-300 m in region 3. The northern tip of the coastal zone from Ivujivik, southeast to about 150 km north of Kangirsuk, was excluded (Figure 1). Exploratory transects flown in 1993 indicated that few geese use this mountainous area.

METHODS

The survey followed the methodology of Malecki and Trost (1990). Aerial transects were flown in a Partenavia twin engine at 30 m above ground level and a ground speed of 140 km/h. Observers recorded the number of geese observed as singles, pairs, or in groups (3 or more geese) within 200 m of each side of the plane. We occasionally observed multiple pairs of geese in close association (< 10-15 m apart). We classified these geese as grouped birds, since they were unlikely to be associated with a territory. Observers also recorded similar information for other waterfowl species. Coordinates for each location were generated using a global positioning system (GPS) and stored on a lap-top computer. Transects were flown using a GPS to assist with navigation. Transect width was calibrated before the survey began.

Transects flown in 2004 were established in 1994 and repeated each year thereafter. Total length of transects sampled in each region was determined using variance estimates from the 1993 survey and a target of 10% coefficient of variation (Bordage and Plante 1994). Transects were randomly located within regions until the desired length was reached. All transects were orientated along east-west lines (Figure 1). Two transects and 1 segment of another on the Ungava Bay coast were not flown because of dense fog.

The number of indicated breeding pairs on a given transect was the sum of the singles and pairs observed by both observers. Density of breeding pairs within regions was estimated using quotient estimators while the total population density was estimated using a separate stratified quotient estimator (Cochran 1977). Variances were estimated using the jack-knife procedure (Cochran 1977). The significance of differences in population size between years was assessed with a z-test, using the sum of the sampling variances for the 2 years being compared. The estimates presented in this report are not adjusted for visibility bias and thus represent an index to the population.

RESULTS

Habitat Conditions and Spring Phenology

Transects were surveyed from June 19-26. These dates are similar to surveys conducted during 1993-2003, but later than the 1988 survey (Table 1). Spring temperatures in 2004 were colder than normal and breeding areas remained frozen and snow covered until late May. Although geese arrived on breeding areas by early May (A. Tulugak and P. May, pers. comm.), nesting was delayed until late May or early June.

At the time of the survey, inland areas had 10-25% snow cover and most lakes and ponds were completely or mostly frozen. On coastal areas, small to medium-sized lakes and ponds were mostly open,

but larger lakes remained ice covered. Conditions appeared similar on the Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay coasts. Growth of tree leaves and some grasses was just beginning to occur along both coasts. Water levels were high throughout the survey area, probably reflecting the recent melting of snow.

Breeding Pair and Total Population Estimates

The estimated number of breeding pairs on the Ungava Peninsula (regions 1,2, and 3) in 2004 (174,793 pairs) was similar to the 2003 estimate of 156,937 pairs (P = 0.358) (Table 2, Figure 2) . The number of indicated pairs increased by $\geq$ 25% on 14 transects, decreased by $\geq$ 25% on 9 transects, and remained about the same (< 25% change) on 10 transects in 2004 compared to 2003. The total population estimate ((indicated pairs x 2) + non-breeders) in 2004 (1,014,616 individuals, SE = 85,584) exceeded the 2003 estimate of 760,269 (SE = 89,049) (P = 0.039). (Note: see discussion for interpretation of total population estimates).

Composition of Indicated Pairs

The number of indicated pairs includes birds recorded as pairs and singles. Single birds are likely to be males associated with an incubating female while pairs include some nesting birds as well as subadult or failed breeders. Therefore, the proportion of indicated pairs observed as singles may provide a more reliable indicator of the proportion of indicated pairs that are actually nesting (see Humburg et al. 1998). The percentage of indicated pairs observed as singles on the Ungava Peninsula was 34% in 2004. This was the lowest value in the 12 years of the survey (range = 34-60%, mean = 49%).

Comparison of Hudson and Ungava Bay Coasts

From 1993-2000, the estimated density of breeding pairs was similar in the Hudson and Ungava Bay coastal zones (Figure 3), although density along Hudson Bay tended to be slightly higher. Beginning in 2001, the pair density along Hudson Bay has exceeded the density along Ungava Bay. In 2004, density along Hudson Bay (2.75 pairs/km2, SE = 0.404) was greater than along Ungava Bay (1.13 pairs/km2, SE = 0.246) ($P < 0.001$) (Figure 3). In 2004, the estimated density of breeding pairs increased 10% along the Hudson Bay coast and decreased 7% on the Ungava Bay coast compared to 2003 (Figure 3).. The estimated density of total geese in 2004 increased 22% on the Hudson Bay coast (2004: 16.2 geese/km2; 2003: 13.3 geese/km2) and decreased 9% along Ungava Bay (2004: 4.3 geese/km2; 2003: 4.7 geese/km2) compared to 2003.

The percentage of indicated pairs observed as singles was similar in the coastal zones along Ungava Bay (34%) and Hudson Bay (33%) in 2004 (Figure 4). However, in 7 of the 12 years, the proportion of indicated pairs observed as singles has been lower along the Ungava Bay coast (Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

Number of Breeding Pairs

The estimated number of Canada goose pairs on the Ungava Peninsula in 2004 increased about 12% from 2003. Some growth in the breeding population was expected given the excellent production year in 2001 and the 3 years it takes for young to enter the breeding population. However, recruitment of pairs into the breeding population was likely tempered by the very late spring in 2004. The percent of indicated pairs observed as singles (a better measure of the pairs actually nesting) was well below average in 2004 and the lowest observed in the 12 years this survey has been conducted. This finding is consistent with the late nest

initiation dates and small clutch sizes observed during nest searches of Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay study plots (R. Cotter, pers. comm.). We expect the fall flight to be similar in size to last year and composed largely of adults.

Total Population

The total population estimate for 2004 was about 34% higher than in 2003 (Figure 2), probably reflecting, in part, the good production that occurred in 2003. However, caution should be used when interpreting the estimate of total population size. Total population estimates include breeding pairs, non-breeders (i.e., those not of breeding age), failed breeders, and molt migrants from other areas. Flocks of geese moving north (likely molt migrants) are often observed along the Hudson Bay coast, especially when winds are from the south. For example, between 0920-1030 hrs on June 17 in 2003 we observed 22 flocks of 2-34 geese moving north past the hotel in Povungnituk. We observed few flocks in 2004. However, differences in survey timing and the abundance of molt migrants can clearly introduce substantial variability in the total population estimates.

Abraham et al. (1999) recently examined molt migration in the breeding range of the Southern James Bay Population of Canada geese. They cautioned that the presence of molt migrants is likely to bias total population estimates upwards. Therefore, they concluded that estimates of nesting pairs may provide the most reliable information for monitoring trends in breeding ground populations.

Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay Coasts

The coastal habitat bordering Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay is well known for its high density of breeding Canada geese (Malecki and Trost 1990). However, the Hudson Bay coast supports a much larger breeding population than the Ungava Bay coast. The smaller breeding population along the Ungava Bay coast is partly a function of less land area (Ungava Bay: 9,700 km^2; Hudson Bay: 33,800 km^2) and until

recently, a slightly lower density of breeding pairs in most years. The difference in density of breeding pairs has become much more obvious since 2001 (Figure 3); the Hudson Bay coast now supports more than twice the density of breeding pairs than the along Ungava Bay. This could be related to a number of factors including differential survival or productivity. However, the 6 consecutive years of lower productivity along Ungava Bay (as indexed by the % of breeding pairs observed as singles) between 1996-2001 may explain some of the change (Figure 4).

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Table 1. Dates of Canada goose pair surveys conducted in northern Quebec[1] in 1988 and 1993-2004.

Year	Survey Date	Peak Hatch Date - Hudson Bay[2]	Peak Hatch Date - Ungava Bay[2]
1988	23 May - 3 June		
1993	11-21 June		
1994	21 June - 1 July		
1995	18-24 June		
1996	17-25 June	7 July	2 July
1997	21-26 June	29 June	23 June
1998	20-27 June	20 June	22 June
1999	12-17 June	24 June	26 June
2000	14-27 June	30 June	30 June
2001	11-23 June	22 June	19 June
2002	16-27 June	10 July	3 July
2003	13-21 June	30 June	30 June
2004	19-26 June	July 5	July 5

[1] In 1988, 1993, and 1996, the boreal forest was surveyed prior to the Ungava Peninsula.
[2] Peak hatching dates on Ungava Peninsula from R. Cotter (pers. comm.).

Table 2. Number of Canada goose breeding pairs estimated for the Ungava Peninsula (regions 1,2 and 3) of northern Quebec.

YEAR[a]	TOTAL AREA (km^2)	SURVEYED AREA (km^2)	n[b]	PAIR /km^2 (SE)	TOTAL PAIRS (SE)
1988	222700	575	16	0.53 (0.068)	118031 (15144)
1993	222700	838	35	0.41 (0.056)	91307 (12471)
1994	222700	1214	36	0.18 (0.020)	40086 (4454)
1995	222700	1211	36	0.13 (0.013)	29302 (2967)
1996	222700	1211	36	0.21 (0.023)	46058 (5052)
1997	222700	1239	36	0.28 (0.028)	63216 (6201)
1998	222700	1214	36	0.19 (0.023)	42166 (5009)
1999	222700	1208	35	0.35 (0.040)	77451 (8792)
2000	222700	1107	34	0.42 (0.044)	93230 (9850)
2001	222700	1029	31	0.66 (0.073)	146662 (16185)
2002	222700	1214	36	0.74 (0.068)	164840 (15169)
2003	222700	1208	36	0.71 (0.055)	156937 (12273)
2004	222700	1181	35	0.79 (0.068)	174793 (15049)

[a]1988 (Malecki and Trost 1990).
[b] Number of transects.

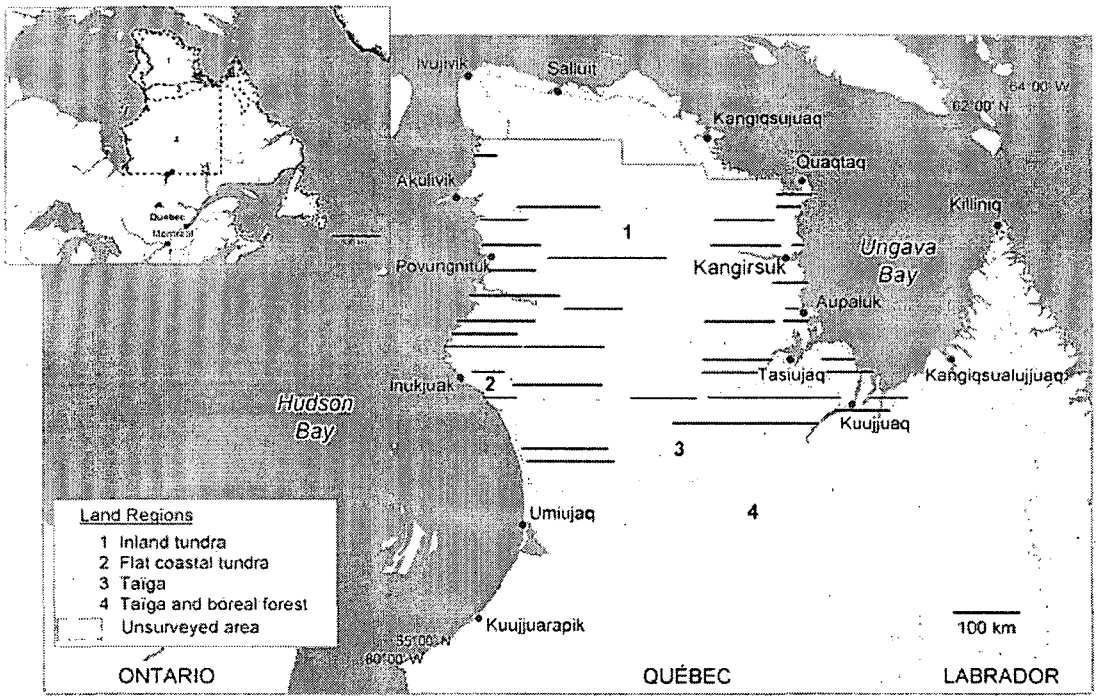
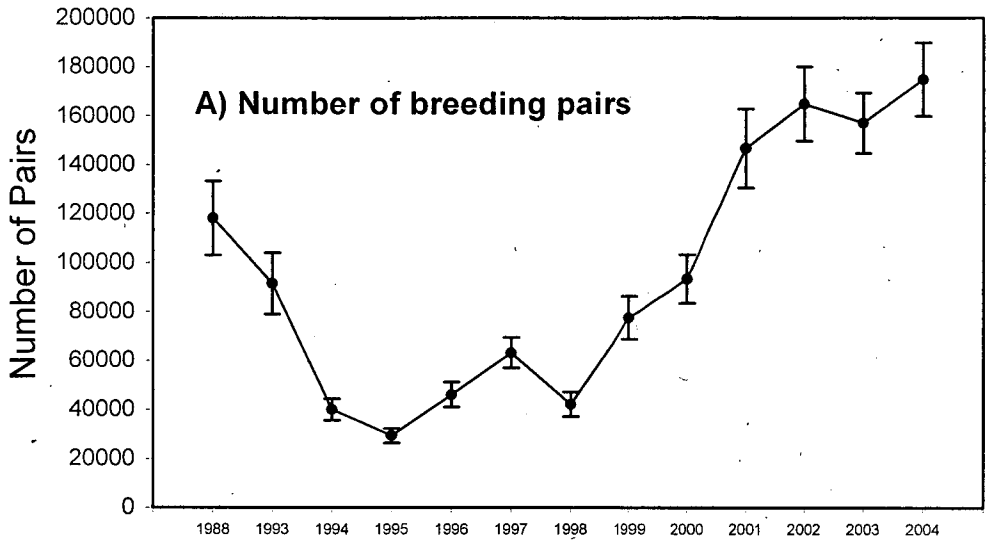


Figure 1. Study area and location of transects for the breeding pair survey in northern Quebec.



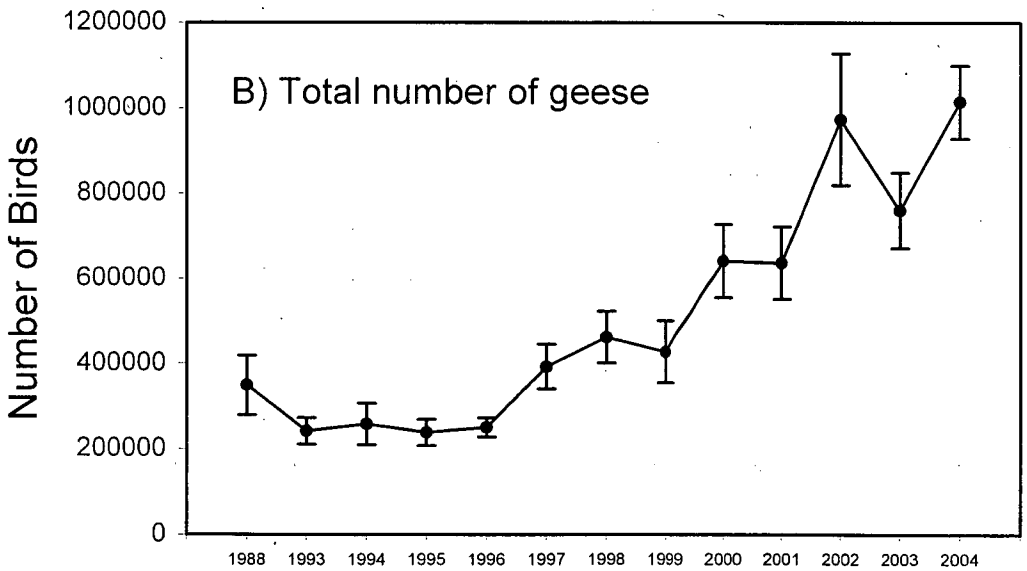


Figure 2. Estimated number (± 1 SE) of Canada goose breeding pairs (A) and total geese (B) on the Ungava Peninsula.

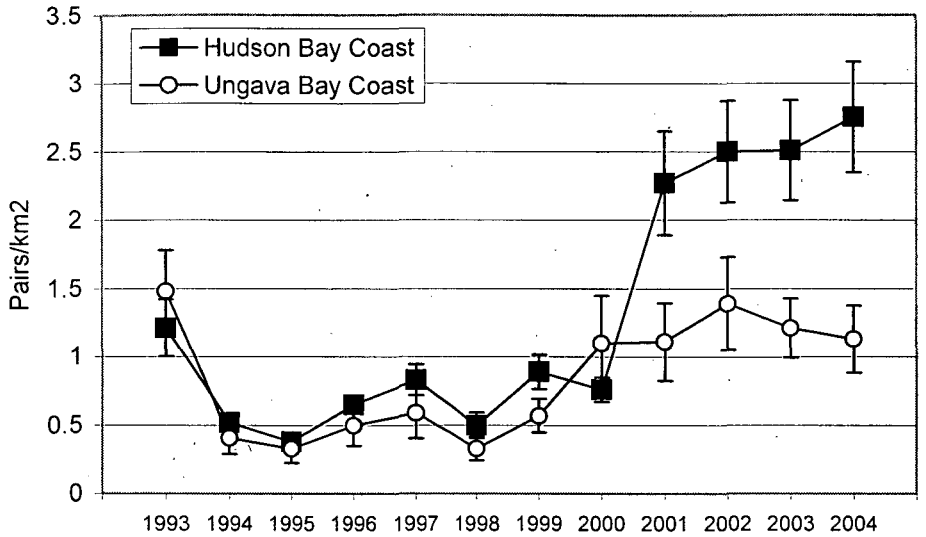


Figure 3. Average density (± 1 SE) of breeding Canada goose pairs for the coastal zones along Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay.

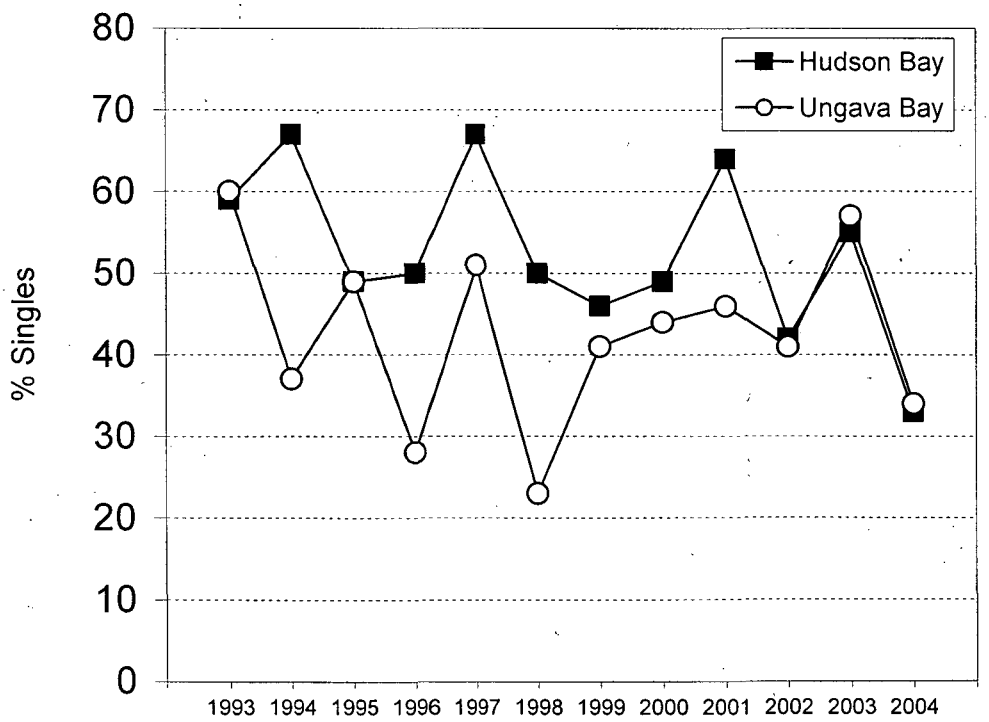


Figure 4. Percent of indicated Canada goose pairs (i.e., singles and pairs) that were observed as singles in the coastal zones along Ungava Bay and Hudson Bay.