2016 Bird of the Year

The Atlantic Brant

Branta bernicla



In the late fall, New Jersey's coastal waters are invaded by flocks of a small sea goose. Someone who is neither birder nor waterfowler might mistake the brant for Canada geese, since they share the same basic colors. Upon closer observation, differences in plumage will be obvious. The Canada's white cheek patch is replaced on the brant by a ring of small white bars circling the neck. The brant also has a shorter neck and bill than its larger cousin. There are differences in flight as well. Brant have a faster wingbeat and fly in much looser, wavering formations. Most hunters can ID them at long distances by their flight pattern alone. And lastly, the soft, rolling call of the brant is very unlike the distinct honk of the Canada goose.

Brant are considered to have two subspecies in North America, The Atlantic and the Pacific, or black, brant. The black brant sports much darker plumage on its belly than does its Atlantic Flyway cousin.

Brant at one time fed almost exclusively on an aquatic plant called eelgrass. During the early 1930s a blight decimated eelgrass beds along the Atlantic coast, causing brant populations to plummet. Brant have since made a comeback, due to the partial recovery of eelgrass and also by switching to other foods, such as sea lettuce. However, by most accounts, a diet of sea lettuce has caused brant to often become much poorer table fare. Many hunters even refuse to take them after the midpoint of the season due to their winter diet. Some will closely examine the underside of the day's first brant, claiming that a greenish tinge near the rectum will indicate the bird has been feeding on sea lettuce. If the tinge is brownish or absent, the brant is believed to have been feeding on foods that will make it more fit to eat.

Eating qualities aside, brant can offer one of the more exciting experiences for the waterfowler, often decoying in large flocks that are rivaled only by snow and Canada geese, giving the hunter a taste of what the market gunners of old might have once experienced.