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## Brant—The Sea Goose

*Rich Stallcup*

For most caring North American humans, the word “geese” might bring visions of thunderous flocks of Snow, Ross’, White-fronted, and Canada geese in winter at unique interior wetlands. Being inside or under 200,000 of these magnificent birds is awesome and unforgettable, and can also serve as a connection to once-untouched planet wildness.

Another fine goose species, Brant (*Branta bernicula*, not to be confused with Brandt’s Cormorant) occurs primarily in winter, along the coasts in special bays where forests of subaquatic *Zostera marina* (eelgrass) thrive. Eelgrass is the Brants’ obligate winter forage, and they normally do not occur where this plant does not grow.

Brant is a holarctic species (it has populations in boreal regions all around the world) that nests on tundra near saltwater environments. There are three to four

subspecies, depending on one’s taxonomic leanings. On the North American continent, most Brant winter on the few adequate estuaries that still exist. Their winter range includes both coasts of the U.S. and, for Black Brant (*B.b. nicricans*, the Eastern Pacific subspecies), southwest British Columbia and the ocean side of Baja California.

**Eelgrass and Brant.** During the winters of 1930-31 and 1931-32, *Zostera* forests failed and crashed due to disease caused by an amoeba-like microbe called *Labyrinthula*. All world Brant were affected. The population hit hardest, *B.b. horta* along the East Coast of North America, was devastated, and the few that survived did so by changing their programmed foraging behavior to include grazing on slightly upland grasses. Today *Zostera* has recovered,

and so have Brant numbers.

Black Brant along our West Coast now have a healthy population again. Having survived overhunting and eelgrass failures, they now number 200,000–300,000 birds. They also have protected sanctuaries where they can live in peace.

**Brant Migrations.** Along the coast of Central California, spring migration happens from mid-

March through May as birds move north from western coastal Baja toward the Arctic. They flock coastally, sometimes right along the beach, and the flocks are often formed as balls rather than V’s or skeins.

Fall migration, for a hefty percent of these birds, is quite different. Finished with breeding, many individuals and family groups move west to stage in the Aleutian Islands. From there, over a period of about one week they all depart, in flocks of various sizes, for an astonishing 3,400-mile, nonstop, over-water flight. Averaging 60 miles per hour, some reach the coast of Baja after 57 hours. They fly well offshore, endure a 40- to 50-degree temperature change between Alaska and Mexico, and lose one-third of their body weight.

**Doing Lunch with Brant.** One good place to be with Brant is Bodega Harbor, Sonoma County, where many hundreds are present in midwinter. (There were none there from about 1960 to 1990.) Get a window seat at the Tides Restaurant (the best eatery there for bird, seal and sea lion viewing). Watch the sea geese work their now safe and flourishing habitat. And bring your binoculars to lunch, always.

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