

Geese can die from neck collars

BY MARION STREBIG

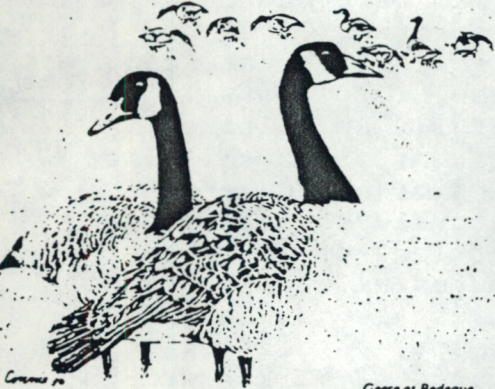
(Now is the time of year that we see collared Canada Geese on P.E.I. This story was originally published in the Spring 1988 edition of Seasons, a publication of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.)

In the shelter created by a small, man-made spit, a flock of Canada geese came skidding to a stop on the water. One, wearing a yellow neck band with black markings, stood out from the rest of the flock. With my binoculars I could easily read the letter sequence, which I jotted down mechanically in my notebook. Nearby, a woman who

ulation in the Carolinas. Increased hunting pressure at the Southern end of their migration route had been put forward as one possible explanation of this decline. If these states were to take the steps necessary to rebuild wintering populations, data would be needed to provide a better understanding of migration patterns, wintering distribution and survival rate of the geese in the Atlantic Flyway. The resulting information was to be used to address inadequacies of migration and wintering habitat and to establish annual hunting rates in line with existing habitat conditions, the distribution of the birds and their reproductive potential.

Accordingly, between 1983 and 1986 more than 25,000 Canada geese in the Atlantic Flyway were banded with yellow collars imprinted with black letters. Taking part were the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and agencies in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, and North and South Carolina.

From the point of view of the agencies collecting data, the collars are attractive because they get ten times as many returns as leg bands (only 4-6 leg bands out of 100 are returned), and because the birds are observed alive and interacting normally with the flock. Two or three sightings of the same bird are often reported in a single



had been throwing scraps to the gulls nudged her companion and said, "Would you look at that poor thing's neck. I don't know how it can swallow."

Instinctively I shrank from this indignant woman. Although I never liked the look of the neck bands, I always attributed my distaste to a transference of human feelings about constrictions around the neck. But, like most birders, I had no reason to believe that the neck bands were harmful. Casual observation of neck-banded birds had tended to support banders' claims that the birds functioned normally and were as strong and healthy as their unbanded kin. Rumours of other problems with the collars had lodged, like a raspberry seed in a tooth, somewhere at the back of my mind. Although I was not totally comfortable with the neck bands, I never gave them serious thought until November 21, 1987.

On that day, in Ottawa, balmy fall weather suddenly gave way to freezing temperatures and ferocious winds. Sitting on the edge of the ice in the Ottawa River, facing the wind and spray, neck-banded Canada geese began to accumulate layers of ice on their collars. Eventually more than a dozen drowned, their heads pulled underwater by the weight of their icy collars. Ice on the neck band chopped off one of the surviving geese weighed 3 kilograms.

The original decision to band Canada geese was made because of concern over a drop in the species' pop-