

North Carolina's Serengeti

By Daniel deB. Richter Jr.



DURHAM, NC - A remarkable display of magic recently descended from the North Carolina sky. Millions of migrating swans, geese, ducks, and other birds once again returned to their winter residence. Some of the most beautiful migrants are snow geese and eastern tundra swans. Many of the wetlands of the North Carolina low country are again noisy and crowded with birds.

Most of these birds returned from a summer in the far North: the Canadian Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Baffin Island, where the birds built nests, laid eggs, and raised families. From late summer to mid-fall, they flew South at up to 50 mph and 8000 feet in altitude, across central Canada and the Dakotas, over the Great Lakes and the eastern USA, and finally leaving even the Chesapeake Bay to the north. After three to four months of flying, birds have re-assembled in enormous, noisy, and active flocks, concentrating in the five counties that make up the Albemarle Peninsula of North Carolina: Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell, Beaufort, and Washington.

Early this month, US Navy jets began flying test missions over and among these flocks of overwintering birds, using different altitudes and flight trajectories, to learn more about how aircraft activity affects bird behavior. Armed with test data on bird-aircraft interactions, the Navy is apparently buttressing its analysis of environmental impact required for constructing its proposed Outlying Landing Field (OLF). The proposed OLF is designed to train pilots for the Navy's new F-18 Super Hornets, and is a 30,000-acre project, situated directly adjacent to Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in Washington County, a core of the winter home for countless thousands of waterfowl.

Grass-roots criticism of the Navy's plans for the OLF appears to be growing. Last week's videos of the Navy's test missions with geese and swans will not help the Navy's case. Yet, while eyes seem focused on the Navy and OLF, we need to pay attention to the landscapes that the birds and the Navy find so attractive. If we understood these wetlands in eastern North Carolina for what they are, we might all agree (Navy planners too) that massive new development projects on the Albemarle Peninsula are not compatible with this continentally significant landscape. The peninsula with its

migratory waterfowl represents nothing less than a North Carolina Serengeti, the East African landscape made world famous by its lions, rhinos, zebras, elephants, and migratory wildebeests.

For the last 50 years, land and water management in eastern North Carolina has been much in the birds' favor. In the 1960s, as few as 10,000 tundra swans overwintered in North Carolina, but swans today are approaching 100,000 strong. This growth is due in part to decades' long efforts of federal and state governments and private landowners, all aimed at improving water quality and habitats of agricultural fields, forests, wetlands, and waterways. The Migratory Bird Protection Act and the National Wildlife Refuge system are both facilitating recovery of migratory bird populations.

A winter visit to the Albemarle Peninsula can be a life-changing experience. Every single student I have ever taken to the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge has been amazed and impressed. From November to March, hundreds or even thousands of tundra swans, snow geese, and many species of ducks can be seen flying overhead or on the water. The best places and sights are in December through February in and around Lake Mattamaskeet, on the two enormous National Wildlife Refuges of Pocosin Lakes and Alligator River, in Pettigrew State Park, or along the lower Roanoke River. Comparing these areas to the Serengeti is no exaggeration.

On a recent Duke University class fieldtrip to the Albemarle Peninsula, my students and I left thinking about the Navy's tests of jet effects on birds, about who among our political leaders will more vigorously oppose the OLF, and about how many migratory cycles the birds will complete before they arrive to find a vast practice-runway complex actively under construction. If the OLF goes forward, North Carolina will lose its Serengeti.

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