

Honk If You Hate Geese

They're everywhere and they're not leaving golden eggs behind

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Early one Sunday morning in July, 87 noisy squatters at a 314-unit condominium complex in East Setauket were rounded up, carted away and killed.

Whether the incident qualified as murder or merely rigorous groundskeeping depends on whom you talk to and their feelings about the victims: resident Canada geese, those ubiquitous waterfowl that have traded in a grueling migratory commute for the year-round comforts of Long Island's suburbs.

Some residents of The Lakes at Setauket felt that the avian interlopers had it coming. After all, each adult left between one to three pounds of droppings on the complex's lawns and patios each day. Still, other residents were outraged. "People were very distraught about this," said Don Cunnius, who felt that non-lethal methods to control the problem - destroying nests or shooing the geese away with border collies - were not given adequate time to work before the homeowners association decided to euthanize the birds.

Too big to be dismissed as vermin, and too digestively prolific to be ignored, Canada geese are one of those surprising species, like deer or raccoons, that not only fail to give way under the pressure of human development, but actually succeed in its clasp. And suburbs, with a relative lack of predators and ample food supply, have become the staging ground for a turf war that at times pits wildlife management agencies and frustrated property owners against animal lovers and the grass-gobbling geese.

Although most Canada geese continue to migrate, nesting up north, between 15,000 to 20,000 Canada geese now live year-round in Nassau and Suffolk counties, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. During seasonal migrations, honking visitor geese swell local populations to between 30,000 and 40,000 birds, all munching, waddling and defecating on grassy patches from Valley Stream to Bridgehampton.

Although protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act which was designed to limit trade in birds and their feathers, Canada geese are not an endangered species. Anyone in possession of a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can legally chase, harass and kill geese deemed to be wildlife nuisances. In a move calculated to make hunters happy while culling resident geese, the Department of Environmental Conservation this year increased bag limits for September goose hunting from five birds to eight birds per day on Long Island. "The sportsmen are happy about that," said Michael Fraser, an environmental department spokesman. But many animal lovers are not.

Once regarded as charming visitors, Canada geese seem to have made the transition to

resident pest in the eyes of many Long Islanders. "When we were kids it was nice, you'd go down to the park and feed the geese," said Steve Krolkowski, a coach for the Massapequa Mustangs youth football league, which plays at John J. Burns Park in Massapequa Park. In recent years, he said, the playing fields drew more and more Canada geese, dropping in, mid-scrimmage, to graze. "They'd start, just a couple at a time, and then half the field is covered," he said. "At the end of the day the kids would be absolutely covered in goose droppings. ... We couldn't let the kids play in it any longer."

A mess underfoot, sure, but goose feces also have been blamed for high coliform levels causing closures at public beaches and lakes. Yet the source is not always so easy to trace. "It's a nuisance problem now, not an ecological problem," said Bryan Swift, a waterfowl specialist at the environmental department.

Not everyone agrees. Some of U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer's annoyed constituents prompted the New York Democrat to sponsor in 2002 an initiative aimed at dealing comprehensively - and non-lethally - with the resident goose problem, citing inconvenience as well as "environmental risk to soil and water."

Long Island was not always as attractive to Canada geese as it is now. For most of the time, much of Nassau County was grassland, and Suffolk County was dominated by forests and pine barrens. Later, geese may have stopped by to feed on grain fields, but nothing provided as explosive a catalyst for permanent population growth as the green carpet of postwar suburban development.

Canada geese have an abiding fondness for the tender shoots of rye and Kentucky blue grass that cover suburban lawns, playing fields and golf courses. Fairways pose a particular lure, with their short grass and man-made ponds. By 2000, Long Island was home to 100 golf courses, nearly triple the number opened before 1950. Expecting Canada geese to stay away from such tempting environs would be "like setting the table, ringing the dinner bell, and then saying don't show up," said John Bianchi, a spokesman for the National Audubon Society.

Food supply may explain why Canada geese don't leave Long Island, but it doesn't tell us how they started breeding here in the first place. Traditionally geese tended to nest where the Canadian forest gave way to tundra. They found food and safety there - no brush, trees or tall grass to camouflage predators such as wolves, that might attack geese on the nest. Safety is especially crucial during summer months, when geese molt and become temporarily flightless. As the weather cooled, Canada geese streamed south along four different flyways toward winter refuges ranging from Central Mexico to the Chesapeake Bay.

There is continued debate in the scientific community over whether geese migration is learned, instinctive or both. Observation of migratory and resident flocks suggests that the birds return to nest where they were born, but that doesn't fully explain how Long Island geese abandoned the Atlantic flyway for the Northern State Parkway.

Experts from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suggest that a practice common among wealthy estate-holders along the North Shore in the Gilded Age - the late 19th to early 20th century - played a big part in anchoring some geese here. Estates maintained decoy flocks made up of Canada geese captured from other regions or migrating visitors whose wings had been clipped. The sight of these land-bound birds gave migrating birds a false impression of safe grazing grounds, luring them closer for the convenience of hunters. Any offspring of decoys or of decoys and migrants would have produced a generation raised outside the traditional flight patterns.

After numbers of migratory Canada geese fell drastically in the first half of the 20th century,

propagation programs were established to reintroduce birds into many states where they had been overhunted. "Geese learn where to nest, where to breed, where to migrate from their parents," said Mike Conover, a biologist at Utah State University's Berryman Institute and author of "Resolving Human-Wildlife Conflicts: The Science of Wildlife Damage Management." He and other scientists theorize that moving Canada geese from where they were raised created new feeding and migratory patterns.

Bianchi of the Audubon Society debates the usefulness of labeling Canada geese as either resident or migratory. Unless a group of geese have been tagged and tracked, he said, it is impossible to tell whether populations at a site are stable or merely passing through an attractive habitat.

"Sixty years ago, you saw a goose inland and it was a major event," said Gil Bergen, superintendent of Connetquot River State Park Preserve in Oakdale. Now what he calls "a plague" of 100 or so birds patrol the park grounds all year.

As geese increased in number, a host of goose-control services sprang up. The beleaguered Massapequa Mustangs applied for a depredation permit and promptly enlisted the services of Ann Marie Gedz, a cheerful woman from Smithtown who, with her husband, Robert, and six border collies, runs A&R Goose Control.

The Smithtown company employs various non-lethal methods to keep down the number of geese in a particular area, ranging from egg addling - poking holes in the shells to keep them from being viable, but leaving them on the nest to keep expectant mothers from laying replacements - to literally harassing the birds off a site with collies trained to herd.

The dogs have made a dent in the number of Canada geese that flock to John J. Burns Park, although a seasonal influx of brants (smaller, short-necked relatives that look like "Mini Me" Canada geese) have temporarily replaced them. Gedz and others who deal with what the trade calls "nuisance wildlife" say that the key to success seems to be working at a site over time with a combination of methods.

Nick Maglaras of Goose Control Inc., the company that conducted the controversial roundup in East Setauket, agrees that long-term management is much more effective at getting geese to go. He said that the homeowners association at The Lakes had tried a few different methods of non-lethal control, including using decoy dead geese, but that no unified policy had been in place before his company was called in - first to oil and puncture eggs on the property, and later to gather the birds with nets to be euthanized.

"In my perfect world I would like to do nest work on an established population for at least four seasons," he said. That would ensure, in the case of a roundup, catching juvenile geese that may have left their birth site but return during the treatment time to nest there.

Groups such as Virginia-based Geese Peace argue that there is no need to kill the geese at all, because non-lethal controls, performed efficiently and over a large enough area, can handle the problem.

Geese Peace is working with Nassau County to implement a county-wide system of goose control, focusing on nest destruction and other harassment intended to move birds along. They also recommend letting grass grow longer and rougher and bordering bodies of water with fences or taller vegetation.

Wildlife agencies and many scientists support these methods, but point out that while they may be effective at moving geese from one place to another, they do not address the fundamental problem. "Short of widespread habitat change - getting rid of the open ballfields,

the golf courses - the habitat that attracted them will continue to," said Dan Rosenblatt, the environmental department's regional wildlife manager for Long Island.

Officials from both the state Department of Environmental Conservation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife agree that hunting and the occasional roundup are necessary to keep resident populations at a manageable level. Fish and Wildlife officials are considering streamlining the depredation permitting process to make it easier for local authorities to act quickly when dealing with geese.

"If geese aren't being hunted and harvested, they're going to proliferate," said waterfowl expert Swift.

The Audubon Society supports all these approaches, including hunting, because the extraordinarily widespread abundance of Canada geese places them at little risk for extinction.

In Bianchi's opinion, an animal rights approach may actually hurt migratory Canada geese because populations of resident geese, which live with no threats and have abundant food, are actually taking resources from the visitors.

"By doing nothing, you are saying that these birds that sit here all day in our community are more important than the migratory birds doing what they are supposed to," said Bianchi. "There's no risk for them to sit still. Those birds that would have been weeded out by normal natural selection ... exist because there are no threats. It's wonderful for the individual birds ... but it's not the way they are supposed to function."

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