

Canada Geese

Skeins of Canada geese flying in V formation are harbingers of spring and fall. Yet these large and intelligent birds are a frequent cause of complaint for managers of parks, lake associations, corporate parks, golf courses, and even backyards. A better understanding of Canada geese will help you understand why this species has become such a problem and what you can do about it.

Natural History

There are 11 subspecies of geese and most migrate and nest exclusively in northern Canada. The bird that is most commonly a problem is the “giant Canada goose”. Known for its large size and long neck, it can weigh 14 to 20 pounds and is the largest of all Canada goose races. This species was once hunted so extensively that it almost became extinct in the 1920’s. Wildlife management, including hunting restrictions and captive breeding and re-stocking programs, and agricultural practices are largely responsible for today’s healthy populations.

Food

Geese are grazing birds that eat a varied diet. They eat the roots, shoots, stems, seeds, and leaves of grass and sedges, grain, bulbs, and berries. They also eat insects and aquatic invertebrates. Geese often spend the winter in agricultural areas where they feed on post-harvested grain and foliage. Geese generally feed in early morning and late afternoon.

Cover

Geese prefer open water with open shorelines where they are safe from disturbance. An expansive view affords them a degree of safety from predators, and long sight lines for take off and landing.

Breeding Habits

Geese nest in a variety of habitats, generally on the ground near water. They will also nest on islands, rocky cliffs, even large tree cavities or artificial nest structures such as old tires. The female builds the nest of grasses and moss, lined with feathers. On average five to six eggs are laid and incubated for 25 to 28 days.

Geese usually mate for the first time in their second or third year, and pairs remain together as long as both are alive and healthy. They often return to the same spot year after year if they are successful in raising young. Geese raise an average of four to seven goslings each year.



By learning more about the habitat and life habits of Canada geese you can better understand the problems they can cause and determine appropriate solutions.

Family Habits

Adult geese pair for life. Young geese stay with adults their entire first year. They migrate south with their parents and return north with them to their nest site in spring. Young form yearling flocks that often remain together until they have matured and are ready to mate.

Predators

Because of their size, intelligence, and wariness, geese are less subject to predation than most other waterfowl. Hawks and owls prey on immature and some adult geese. Snapping turtles, snakes, and land-based predators take goslings that stray from parental protection.

Migration

Geese migrate along predictable routes known as *flyways*. Year after year, they travel, rest, feed, and nest in fairly predictable locations, called *staging areas*, along these routes. In fall, family groups from different areas assemble into large flocks, preparing for migration.

In recent years, wildlife biologists have identified a change in Canada goose migration patterns. Many geese are no longer migrating great distances, but are forming “resident” populations that remain within a limited geographic area. Of concern are the dwindling numbers of Canada geese that breed in the arctic and sub-arctic and winter throughout the United States. Why these changes are taking place is not well understood and more research needs to be done. Loss of habitat, agricultural practices, and altered natural environments may all be linked to changing population dynamics.

Controlling Canada Geese

Canada geese are perceived by some property owners to be a nuisance. Their feces can leave a substantial mess that must be cleaned regularly and they are not easily deterred from going about their business. Many people encourage geese when they first arrive, only to find that after several years of nesting success, they can no longer tolerate the large flock that has made the place home.

Without realizing it, many properties provide ideal goose habitat. Open water, an extensive food supply, and lots of open space are precisely what geese are looking for.

There are no easy solutions to geese problems. If you are experiencing difficulties, follow these guidelines to assess your situation and determine the best solution.

Relocation or killing (culling) of geese has been shown in many areas to be ineffective in alleviating problems with geese. They come back or others take their place.

1. Evaluate the problem.

Try to define the problem specifically. Is the problem only in certain areas? Is goose feeding or feces causing damage? Survey your property to determine how you might actually be encouraging geese. Very short grass, an expansive view around a pond, and people who are feeding geese are likely attractants. When does the problem occur? If geese seem to be a problem only in fall or spring they are using the area for rest stop during migration. If geese are wintering on your property, you are likely providing habitat for a migratory population.

2. Reduce your frustration.

It is important to recognize that it is extremely difficult to control nature. If your goal is to remove every goose from your land, you will likely end up frustrated, angry and unsatisfied. However, there are things you can do to try to lessen the impact of geese and discourage them from overrunning the land. Be realistic in your attempts to control geese. You will have much greater success if you try to strike a balance between Canada geese and the needs of visitors, employees, and maintenance personnel.

3. Choose the most effective control measure for your situation.

Control measures fall roughly into three categories: altered habitat, scare tactics, and intervention. Some combination of these may prove most successful. Remember that the easiest time to deal with geese is *before* they start nesting. Be ready in early spring when geese begin to breed. Even if they are well established on the property, preventing them from nesting will break their successful breeding record, and discourage them from returning or staying.

Altered Habitat

- ❑ **Mechanical Barriers:** String monofilament line or wire around the edge of your ponds where geese are most prevalent. The wire should be approximately six inches above the water line. Several places have found that two rows of string, one at the water's edge and one about two to three feet in the water, are most effective. Fencing can also be used.
- ❑ **Vegetative Barriers:** Instead of mowing right to the water's edge, plant aquatic vegetation around lake and pond margins. This helps to disrupt the expansive view, acts as a physical barrier, and provides excellent habitat for other more desirable wading birds and wildlife. If normally mowed grass is allowed to grow higher it can further dissuade geese.
- ❑ **Unpalatable vegetation:** If possible, plant grass that geese don't like to eat such as fescues. Kentucky Blue Grass should be avoided as it is a goose favorite. A non-toxic chemical, called methyl-anthranilate (REJEX-IT), can be applied to lawns, fields, or other areas to deter geese from feeding. The chemical is a flavoring found in grapes that is sweet to humans and abhorred by geese.
- ❑ **Prohibit Feeding:** Feeding can harm geese, as well as other wildlife. The concentration of waterfowl created by feeding allows for the spread of diseases, such as avian cholera and avian botulism. The food that people throw into water and the increased amount of geese feces also adds to nutrient loading, which impacts water quality and harms aquatic life. Use signs or other means of education to inform people not to feed geese.



Tall vegetation around ponds can help make Canada geese uncomfortable.

Scare Tactics

- ❑ **Visual Scare Tactics:** Streamers, balloons, flags, scarecrows, and even dead goose decoys can be used to frighten geese away. Mylar bird scare tape can be tied to stakes near ponds, but is of limited value for geese control. Remember, geese are big birds that don't scare easily. Visual tactics should be used on a varied schedule and alternated to prevent geese from becoming used to them.
- ❑ **Noise Makers:** Shell-crackers, sirens, pistol launchers, banging on pots and pans, and other noise can be used to scare geese away. If this is combined or alternated with other methods just as geese are coming, it can be effective.
- ❑ **Dogs:** Many areas have successfully used dogs to chase or stalk the birds. Because of their gentle, but energetic nature, border collies and English setters make good choices.

Intervention

When other control methods have failed, local authorities should be contacted to help you deal with Canada geese. Your local state wildlife department (could be named Fish & Wildlife, Environmental Conservation, Natural Resources, or another similar name) or Department of Agriculture can help you determine the best method of intervention. This may include permits to disrupt nests or eggs, physical relocation (trap and transfer), or hunting. Never destroy Canada geese or disturb their nests without a permit. Canada geese are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Not only may you pay large fines for killing geese, the resulting negative publicity can be devastating.

Education

If geese are a problem, you must not only deal with the geese, you must also effectively deal with patrons of your property. Communicate what you know about Canada geese natural history and goose control. Use a newsletter or bulletin board to let people know what strategies you have employed or plan to implement to minimize nuisance or damage. By regularly updating people about your efforts, you can help to lessen complaints.

Finally, recognize that you are not alone. Many people are struggling with the same problem. Encourage organizations to which you belong to open a dialogue with the U.S. Department of Fish & Wildlife or Ministry of Natural Resources (Canada). Wildlife biologists are conducting on-going research about Canada geese. They are interested in learning more about why migratory populations are declining while resident populations are on the rise. Communicating your concerns and observations can result in positive progress toward striking a balance between humans and geese.



Educational signs can help you enlist others in your attempts to reduce Canada geese problems.

CANADA GEESE ON THE WEB

GeesePeace

<http://geesepeace.com>

All About Birds, administered by The
Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Canada Goose](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Canada_Goose)