

Vamoose to the Goose

By R.W. Delaney, Business Writer

Beauty and the Beast.

Lovely, aren't they? -- those giant Canada geese artfully dotting the landscaped grounds. But look closer. They're spotting the lush lawns and lake shores with unsightly droppings that accumulate by the pound. And the goose droppings may potentially harbor disease-bearing bacteria and other unhealthy microbes. Work is still being done to confirm if this has implications for humans. Taking the matter one step farther, goose feces in quantity can foul a lake or pond and change the ecological balance, turning a pleasant pool into an over-productive pond clogged with slimy green algae and an overabundance of aquatic plants.

Not so lovely after all, those Canada geese, at least not in large numbers. The surge in the goose population has become a noticeable problem from Washington State to the State of Maine, as more and more of the pretty critters find much to like at lakes and ponds in corporate and residential complexes, municipal parks, upscale resorts, and laid-back golf-course communities. This gives grief to property managers everywhere.

Jim Bland, owner/director of Integrated Lakes Management in Gurnee, Illinois, reports that a single 100-acre lake in northern Illinois was home to an estimated 12,000 Canada geese as a part of a winter time "super-flock." Experts now measure the goose population in terms of "resident days" and number of animals on location. Bland doesn't mince words. "Lawns can be carpeted with feces," he says, noting that clean-up costs can be substantial. The need to address the issue is growing as suburban and rural areas collide. The retention ponds built by developers to handle storm water run-off and control flooding are often irresistible attractions to a flock of geese seeking breeding grounds.

Where the Wild Goose Goes.

Besides being big, beautiful, black and white birds, Canada geese are stubborn, territorial, and aggressive. Their interests can conflict with human interests in urban and suburban settings. Attracted by freshly mowed lawns, an abundant supply of water, and suitable nesting sites, a flock of Canada geese (from 15 birds to thousands) might take up permanent residence.

Jim Bland recalls that a single pair of geese took up residence near the entrance of a stylish corporate center. The geese, classically territorial and assertive, were

chasing employees and visitors away. It wasn't especially good for business or for employee relations.

Discouraging a Gaggle of Geese (and Goslings).

Bland tells his clients up front: "There's no surefire method that works all the time in all places." He operates on the assumption that while no one can solve the goose problem 100 percent, he can certainly keep it under control by applying a variety of management techniques in different combinations.

For example, control techniques need to be varied, depending on the life-history phase of the invading geese, the severity of infestation, the condition and type of property, the time of year, and the cost of deterrence. In compliance with the law, property owners are entitled to deter migratory birds by harassing them without harming them. Major methods of control fall into five categories.

1. **Modify the habitat**, usually by introducing barriers to entry. For example, erecting fences or establishing tall grasses and thick vegetation at water's edge around the perimeter of a small lake can serve as useful deterrents. Another method is to construct grids or place netting over entire ponds, reservoirs and similar bodies of water to prevent geese from landing in the first place. But this is not aesthetically acceptable in many circumstances and can be costly to install and maintain. Also, post signs saying "Please do not feed the geese." Other measures include installing large boulders at the shoreline and turning off aerators in winter so that ponds will freeze over.

2. **Frighten the geese** with visual objects or noise-makers. This includes using reflective tape, flapping flags, scarecrows, water sprays, big-eyed balloons, fake owls, propane "cannon shots," and programmable sound-producing devices that broadcast bird distress cries to scare away the scouting geese. Dogs can be employed to chase geese, and especially the vulnerable goslings -- but not in situations where unleashed dogs pose a threat or inconvenience to human inhabitants. And one more reported deterrent, recommended by Bland: inflatable alligators. The neighbors may laugh, and it requires daily repositioning, but it can work.
3. **Disrupt and discourage entry, nesting, and breeding by using decoys and competitors.** Since swans are natural enemies of geese, swan decoys can be used to ward off intruders. Better yet, try a pair of real swans to drive off encroaching waterfowl. "But," warns Bland, "the care and maintenance of swans is not so easy and it can be expensive."
4. **Employ birth control or death control.** Egg depredation is often used to control geese. That is, fertilized eggs in the nest are shaken to destroy the embryos. This method requires a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bland says, and must be timed impeccably. A similar method is to coat the eggs with vegetable oil, which suffocates the developing embryos. Hunting -- in season and where sanctioned -- helps keep geese populations down, but obviously cannot be undertaken in urban and suburban locations.
5. **Repellents.** In recent years, repellents such as GooseChase, made by Bird-X, Inc. in Chicago, have proved to be effective deterrents. GooseChase is a concentrate made from extracts of grape parts found to be most distasteful to geese. A solution of one part GooseChase to 30 parts of water is sprayed on the grass and vegetation where the geese normally forage. The solution irritates their palates, which sends them away to "greener pastures" elsewhere. "Geese find it noxious," Bland summarizes. Bland, who founded his consulting and lake management business in 1987, recommends using a backpack sprayer to distribute the GooseChase solution evenly and widely. "It produces better distribution over the lawn. Our crew members use the same precautions as with any chemical: protective gloves and Tyvek suits," he adds. He says it costs about \$140 in materials and \$160 in labor to cover an acre of grass. "This is a good product," he continues. "It works. But," he adds, "it is

water-soluble, so it must be reapplied every two to four weeks, depending on rainfall." (According to GooseChase directions, repeat applications can use a more diluted solution of 60 to one.) "It can be relatively expensive over an entire season," Bland says, "but not when you compare it to the cost of cleanup."

"Although the problem is national in scope, the techniques we use do not represent a collective solution. Rather, these are local, individual and personal types of control, carefully applied. Until nationwide and statewide solutions are available, property managers must deal with control on a local basis."

Extra Benefits of Getting Rid of Geese.

Geese in certain situations are giant nuisance factors. But Bland's concern as a property manager goes beyond the messiness, odor, inconvenience, and cleanup cost of geese. Health and safety may be issues, he says. "We know that geese harbor various pathogenic parasites and bacteria, and we know what they are. They include Cryptosporidium, Giardia, and E.coli. But are they transferable from geese to humans and are they infectious? We don't know the answer for sure. Given the uncertainty of the situation, I believe it's wise to err on the side of safety," Bland concludes.

There's no question that geese have a right to live and flourish in the wilderness, in our vast preserves and wildlife refuges, and in many parks and places where they do not intrude heavily on the environment or upset the balance

of nature. But when it comes to sharing permanent occupancy of residential and commercial spaces with human beings, a little GooseChase goes a long way to keeping the peace -- without harming the majestic animal.

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Profile of Giant Canada Goose ***(Branta canadensis maxima)***

Adult weight: up to 25 pounds.
Wingspan: up to six feet.
Life-span: up to 30 years.
Waste: up to one pound of excrement per day per
goose!

Preferred habitat:

- Near water
- Easy access (sloping shoreline)
- Low vegetation for unobstructed view of predators
- Mild winter with ice-free ponds
- Accessible and abundant vegetation and forage for grazing (grass, cattails, bulrushes, berries, algae and pond weeds)

Other notable traits:

- Monogamous; mates for life.
- Traditionally migratory, but changing in some areas where habitat is favorable year-round.
- V-flight pattern.
- Tendency to return to same nesting areas.
- Typical clutch is five or six eggs; but a dozen or more is becoming more common under ideal conditions.

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