

Goose Control: Owning a Dog or Hiring a Service

When I first became a golf course superintendent, it was a rare and beautiful sight to see Canada geese fly in formation, and if you were lucky, land on your golf course for a drink and a snack. You would run and get your camera so you could get some great shots of wildlife up close and personal!



Author Harold Frederickson tips his cap to Border collies.

All that has changed now. Many Canada geese do not migrate as they once did. We now have what are referred to as resident geese. These geese will remain in an area unless there is a heavy snow cover and no food or open water is available. Between these resident geese and the true migratory geese, the goose population has become a problem that has grown out of control. Yes, they are everywhere ... at golf courses, colleges, cemeteries, shopping centers, office complexes, and even in your own backyard!

Over the years, at conferences and trade shows, my partner Susan Hagberg and I have repeatedly fielded the question as to whether our company will sell a Border collie that has been trained to chase geese. The answer is yes, we can, but let's examine some of the features, both pro and con, of owning a dog as opposed to hiring a dog and handler.

Owning a Dog

A great reason for a resident dog is that he is always there when you are. If you take him out routinely, he will do his job well and rid your course of geese. However, owning a dog is a commitment and dogs are not disposable. Border collies are very social animals. They love being with people. If you buy a dog, it shouldn't be locked in the shop all night with the tractor and mowers. It needs to be with and bond with its handler. Bonding is a very important part of a dog's will to work and sometimes a handler change can have an adverse change in the dog's work habits and personality.

Some of the responsibilities of owning a dog are as follows:

- **Medical Needs:** All dogs need regular visits to the vet. In addition to the shots, there are heartworm tests and meds and because Border collies on regular goose patrol spend so much time outside, flea and tick prevention is imperative.
- **Food:** Herding dogs have special nutritional needs. Because of their increased activity, they must have a very high-protein food.
- **Liability:** Because this is a working dog, it is suggested that you carry extra liability insurance.
- **Grooming:** It is amazing what a dog will get into and a dead skunk is Chanel No. 5 to a Border collie! Because the dogs work outside, they also need regular brushing and baths.



Geese take flight from a canine pursuer.



Border collies are "intelligent, active dogs that constantly need stimulation, rigorous exercise and supervised activity. They certainly are not couch potatoes and can be quite a challenge."

• **Environment:** Because of the chemicals stored and used on a golf course, there is more of a chance that an active, inquisitive dog could develop health problems because of exposure. There is also the problem of cleaning up after your dog. Our handlers carry poop bags and always clean up after our dogs, but

if the dog is running free that is not always possible.

• **When There Are No Geese:** There is nothing harder on a working dog than no work. They become bored and a bored dog is a problem dog. Because they are herders, Border collies will herd anything that is

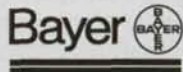
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available: mowers, cats, people, and worst of all, cars. More than once, a good dog has been hit by a car that he was trying to herd. Boredom also means digging holes, tearing up anything available, becoming aggressive, and last but not least, marking anything he considers worth possessing.

- **Cost:** There is the initial cost of the purchase of the dog plus the maintenance, vet bills, medicine, grooming, insurance and the emotional cost of getting attached to the dog.

Hiring a Dog

Migratory Bird Management dogs live with their individual handlers and are always eager to work. This is one hallmark of a good service. Because these dogs go to many accounts, they are daily exposed to geese and have the satisfaction of constantly working. This means that they never have the opportunity to sour and are always stimulated to work. Off-season, a good service will ensure that the dogs are retrained and take agility training so they don't become bored.

- **Service an Account:** Most accounts can be serviced with one dog and one handler. On accounts where there is a larger-than-normal goose problem, a good service will use multiple dogs and handlers. Because a goose will naturally return to its birthplace to mate and multiply year after year, it is important that the geese realize that your property is not a safe place to stay and raise a family. Varying the times of service visits is vital, because the geese will figure the schedule out after a few days, and if visits are random it will confuse the geese. We want the geese to sense that there is a predator on the property. A herding dog moves like a predator and, therefore, we can accomplish our goal. No goose wants to live where there are foxes or coyotes, consequently, they will move on.
- **The Cost Of Service:** The cost of this type of service is based on a formula with several parts to the equation. Applying that formula

should entail a visit to the property for observation and an opportunity to speak to the golf course superintendent about acreage, water and seasonal differences in goose activity. At that time, a good service will also collect information about how the superintendent has addressed the goose nuisance problem in the past. After a thorough analysis comes customized design of a service program that will best manage the unique goose problem. Eventually, when the goose population is at a "manageable" level, a good firm will service as maintenance only. At MBM, for example, we have found that as geese counts get less and less, we need to be "on-call only."



A Border collie practices her dog paddle.

- **Professional Crews, Two- and Four-Legged:** In investigating use of a service, remember to check the credentials of personnel, both the two- and four-legged varieties. A good service will have dogs and handlers specifically trained in goose removal to get the job done professionally. Further considerations: are the handlers uniformed? Do they drive company vehicles so they are easily identifiable? What about insurance? A reputable service will be fully insured and will furnish certificates of insurance to each account.
- **Prove It Works!** From a good service, expect documentation like we provide customers of MBM: a monthly service report that gives an accounting of our days of visit, time of visits, goose counts, location of geese during visit and direction of flight of the geese. With this report, a superintendent is able to clearly see the progress.

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- **Egg Depredation Service and Flight Control:** Goose control can sometimes require a multifaceted campaign, so a good service should be able to offer egg-depredation services (egg adding, or shaking) and help you obtain a permit for this process. Flight Control is a turf application that discourages geese from feeding on the property. MBM, for instance, is an authorized agent for Flight Control; we can supply the product and are well-versed in advising on when and how to best use this technique.

In Conclusion

After living with three Border collies for four years, I have discovered that they are intelligent, active dogs that constantly need stimulation, rigorous exercise and supervised activity. They certainly are not couch potatoes and can be quite a challenge.

I hope that this article will help you with your decision on whether owning a dog or hiring a service will suit your needs. Please feel free to call me with any questions that I have left unanswered and I will be happy to answer them.

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Superintendents Speak

Think a dog might be the remedy for that gaggle of geese waddling across the fairway? Then you need to consider the pros and cons of dog ownership versus hiring a reputable service. Here are the personal experiences of a few MAGCS superintendents.

Henry Michna
Winnetka G.C.

Several years ago, I was faced with the crisis of 25 pair of geese calling Winnetka Golf Club home in spring, probably due to the absence of coyote/fox the previous year. For years, this ecosystem had one pair successfully nest on a small island. That spring, chasing the geese from the course with my two German shepherds was too cumbersome and staff working my family's pets was not an option. Migratory Bird Management solved the problem and has become an integral part of the operation. The part I enjoy most is working together observing patterns and developing strategies for the greatest control possible.

I feel the best-case scenario for controlling any goose problem is owning a Border collie. However, at Winnetka we opted for the service due to the 24/7 job of owning a dog. Due to the potential financial savings, the park district offered to buy a Border collie for any golf maintenance staff. None of my staff or I desired another pet at home. In addition, this breed's qualities that make it "the best" at goose control require the right owner to understand a working dog's needs. This last fall, we had seven or eight different dogs work the course at times, and if I spent more than five minutes saying hello to the Border collies and their handlers I would want to take one of the dogs home. They truly are a wonderful breed that have an excellent temperament.

Greg Thalmann
Fox Run G.C.

The Elk Grove Park District purchased Ami (a Border collie) in February of 2000 to control the goose population at Fox Run Golf Links. That year, we only had a couple nesting pair that hatched goslings on the course. Ami kept all other geese from staying around or nesting. In the spring of 2001, Ami chased all nesting geese off of Fox Run. We did have three pair that nested off the course and brought their young here for the summer, a total of about 24 geese. Once the young could fly, Ami made sure that they didn't stay around.

Most of the golfers think that Ami was the best purchase we have ever made because of the reduction of goose droppings. She has been here for only two years, and everyone knows her name. I have been here for almost 20 years and very few golfers know mine!

We researched both options, whether to purchase a dog or hire a service to control the goose problem. Some of our concerns about owning a dog were who would take care of the dog, where would it stay, the amount of time needed during the day to take the dog out, etc. Debbie Christensen, the clubhouse manager, volunteered to help me take care of the dog, so we decided that purchasing the dog would be our best option. Ami comes to work with me in the morning, and I take her on the course every time I go out. Debbie takes care of Ami when she has a few minutes or when I'm at a meeting or on vacation.



Scott Witte
Cantigny Golf Club

Cantigny Golf has a great reputation as a Certified Audubon Sanctuary, but when it comes to the Canada goose, where do you draw the line? Prior to my arrival in 1995, Tony Rzdazki did a fine job chasing geese with his dogs, and the geese didn't seem to be that big of a problem. Unfortunately, after Tony's dogs had been gone for a few years, the problem seemed to escalate. Now the obvious question was, "Scott, why don't you get a dog?" My response was and still is, "I'm not a dog guy." So we did other things. We obtained annual permits to manage eggs and nests, we used "Whizz-bangers" and "Whistlers," and we even used many of the new liquid deterrents on the really heavily trespassed areas. The geese just continued to overwhelm our best efforts. That is when it was clear to me that something had to be done.

So in the late spring 2001 prior to summer molting, we hired a service to help us out. Within two weeks, our goose count was drastically reduced. The only geese that stayed were the pairs with goslings. During the heavy migratory times, the service would visit two or three times in one day. I'll be using the service again this year, starting in March.



-Harold Frederickson
Migratory Bird Management, Inc.