



A border collie is an effective, humane way to rid your course of Canada geese. Here's what you need to know before taking on the responsibility.

BY MARISA PALMIERI

The tales of goose-chasing heroics overheard at chapter meetings, seminars and conferences are enough to at least pique the average superintendent's curiosity about getting a golf course dog.

But with that prospect comes a slew of questions. How much would it cost? Do I have to be a dog person? Would the dog bother golfers?

Rick Evelo, golf course superintendent and general manager at Gleneagle Golf Club in Colorado Springs, Colo., is one person who believes the benefits far outweigh the costs. In the past, there were times when the course's Canada geese population was close to a thousand, Evelo says.

"There were droppings everywhere," he says. "When that stuff dries it's like concrete. You can mow them on the greens, but it'll smear, and there will be black and white spots everywhere."

In addition to unsightliness, geese can damage turf.

"Their favorite spot is where the cup is, and

they start nipping away at the greens," Evelo says. "It's like an open wound. When it gets to the point where it affects the quality and health of the turf, you have to do something about it."

At Gleneagle, an 18-hole semiprivate facility, the problem came to a head just before Evelo was hired in 2005. The general manager at the time had been a member before he started working for the club. With the geese problem worsening, he researched the issue and talked to the owners about getting a dog. Then he began searching for farms that raise and train goose dogs.

The general manager discovered what many facilities with goose problems have before — border collies' wolf-like gazes are frightening to geese and effective for keeping them out of areas where they're a nuisance and cause damage. Because border collies are herders not hunters, they never harm the geese. Canine harassment is considered a humane method of goose control by the Coalition to Prevent the Destruction of Canada Geese.



And you know it?
Your dog's right?
I mean, as I said,
life isn't a picnic
of your dog and
we'll look it in the
web site.



Rick Evelo, golf course superintendent and general manager of Gleneagle Golf Club in Colorado Springs, Colo., poses with Bett the goose dog.

"One of the questions I was asked during my interview was, 'Do you like dogs?'" Evelo says. "Then they said we've got a goose dog on order. She's flying out next week."

Luckily, it wasn't a problem for Evelo who calls himself an outdoors guy. He grew up on a farm in northern Wyoming, lived in Montana, and has always loved dogs and had pets.

Since Gleneagle's border collie, Bett, arrived, the geese problem is no more. During the winter months there may be a handful of geese around from time to time, but other than that, geese are no longer an issue. The course a mile down the road, however, had geese all last summer, Evelo says.

WILL ANY DOG DO?

Some people use other breeds for canine harassment, but border collies are the breed of choice because of their intense predatory gaze, says Mary Felegy, president of Fair Game Goose Control in Congers, N.Y.

"It's known as 'the eye,'" she says. "Their gaze is so intimidating and frightening to geese – they immediately read the dog as a threat."

Additionally, border collies bred from working lines are relentless.

"If something is offering them attention vs. work – whether it's food, affection or play – they're going to choose working every time," Felegy says.

In fact, their work ethic is the reason they need to be trained. As working dogs are trained to do just that, one concern is they don't know when to quit. That's why a goose dog needs to know commands and respond to a handler. Goose dogs can't run free for fear of drowning or working themselves to exhaustion.

"There are times in the winter when we'll have to chase the geese from one side of the course to the other," Evelo says. "At times, Bett gets so tired we have to give her some rest. She doesn't know that on her own."

At Farmington Country Club in Charlottesville, Va., Tweed, a border collie, is in his 11th year of duty. During the past few years the club has introduced remote-control boats to provide back-up on the water, so the senior dog doesn't exhaust himself, says golf course superintendent Scott Kinnan.

"He's getting old and he's slowed down a bit," he says. "It can be a lot for him, so we attack it from a few different angles."

Though some golf courses take on other types of dogs or untrained border collies that aren't trained, Evelo recommends superintendents only use professionally trained goose dogs.

"There's no way we could do it if she were wild or untrained," he says. "We would have so many handling issues."

Felegy agrees that taking on an untrained dog or a rescue dog can be a gamble. Untrained golf course dogs may bark, chase golf balls and become a nuisance to golfers.

"Some dogs may have ended up in rescue for reasons that render them unsuitable for a golf course situation," she says. "It may work out, but you have to be sure your trainer is willing and qualified to help you assess the dog's potential."

WHERE DO YOU GET A GOOSE DOG?

Bett came to Gleneagle at age 2 from Kuykendall Working Border Collies, a Franklinville, N.C.-based farm that trains goose, sheep and cattle dogs. The club had to go through a lengthy application process, including a phone interview, when purchasing Bett.

"They don't just send you out a dog or sell to anyone," Evelo says. "They really check out your problem to make sure you need a goose dog. They really care for their dogs."

Bett arrived fully trained. The trainers supplied videos for Evelo and taught him some basic commands. Plus, they're always available by phone for any questions that arise, and they still call occasionally to check in, Evelo says.

Kinnan, who's been at Farmington for seven years, can't recall where Tweed came from, but he says he arrived professionally trained. Long-time maintenance employee Hank Hyde was appointed Tweed's handler, and he spent some time with the trainers learning commands.

As an alternative to owning a goose dog, there are canine harassment services for hire. Handlers and their border collies provide their services to golf courses and other properties that may be havens for geese, like parks and campuses. Handlers release their specially trained dogs, and they chase the geese, who respond by sounding their distress calls and flying away.

The cost for these services ranges widely, Felegy says. Prices depends on location, property size, accessibility, number of water hazards, etc. Her company has serviced properties from as low as \$150 per week up to \$3,000 per week.

HOW MUCH ARE WE TALKING?

Anyone who has a pet knows dogs aren't cheap. Gleneagle, which has a maintenance budget of \$400,000 – a quarter of which goes to water costs – originally paid about \$4,000 for Bett. Initially, there was some skepticism about spending that much money for a dog when the maintenance department has so many equipment needs, Evelo says.

"At first, for a low-budget course you think, 'We're paying \$4,000 for a dog – she better poop gold,'" he says.

But Bett, who's expected to put in at least a decade of service, has more than paid for herself. Her expenses are an \$850-per-year line item in the maintenance budget. That includes food, grooming and vet bills.

Kinnan, who says Farmington paid several thousand dollars for its dog, budgets between \$800 and \$1,000 annually for Tweed, who last

Are you proud of your goose dog? E-mail us (gci@gie.net) a picture of your dog and we'll post it to the Web site.

fall was presented his commemorative 10-year pin for a decade of loyal service.

"We're fortunate to have one of our long-time employees take the dog home with him at night," Kinnan says of Tweed's handler Hyde. "It's more the norm – if the dog isn't actually the superintendent's pet – to house the dog at the shop."

Though Bett is a working dog and was never intended to be a pet, Evelo takes her home about three nights a week. She's a big hit with Evelo's three children, ages 6, 9 and 12. And the members, too.

"Everybody always asks about her," Evelo says.

When Bett stays at the club she's housed in either the maintenance break room or an 8- by 6-foot outdoor pen, which is gated and locked.

"In the summer she's excited about going out there," Evelo says, "But she's skittish about lightening storms, so she'll stay in our break room. At times, when she's done eating her dinner she'll lay down and in the morn-

ing she'll be in the exact same spot. She's a good dog. She's trained to work and sleep," Evelo says. "She's probably a better employee than I am."

Who's going to care for the dog and where he or she will live should be the top considerations for anyone thinking about getting a goose dog, Kinnan says. It's vital to consider how the dog is going to be cared for because, if the dog is effective at controlling geese in the early years, he'll eventually have little work to do.

"It's not like a piece of equipment that you can just put up on a shelf when you don't need it," says Kinnan. "You have to understand the costs and commitment associated. It's not something to be taken lightly."

Thanks to Hyde, the staff at Farmington knows Tweed's in good hands now and when his time at the golf course is done.

"Hank has been a staff member here for 40 years," Kinnan says. "The day he chooses to retire, if Tweed's still around, he'll go with him." GCI

CHECKLIST FOR BUYING A GOOSE DOG



Not all border collies are created equal, and not all breeders adhere to the same ethical sales practices, says Mary Felegy, president of Fair Game Goose Control of Congers, N.Y.

It's easy for a good handler to dazzle a prospective buyer with a mediocre dog or worse, so consider these important questions, courtesy of Felegy. A poor response to any single question need not be a deal-breaker. Just beware of patterns of negative responses.

- Did you breed this dog?
- If not, where did you get it?
- Has the dog ever been abused?
- Was this dog a "rescue" dog from a rescue society? If so, why was the dog sent to rescue in the first place? How long was it there? (Sometimes it works and it's a heartwarming story, other times it's a problem for you ...)
- How many previous owners has this dog had before you got it?
- Has this dog ever done goose control before, besides in training? Where? When? Why is it no longer there?
- How long have you personally had the dog in for training?
- How have you trained the dog? On sheep? Ducks?
- Will the dog swim after geese? Can you demonstrate this?
- How many other goose dogs have you placed into service? May I contact them for references?
- Will the dog come when called? Will the dog come when called when it's working? (Big difference!)
- What bad habits does this dog have? (Assume they all have some.)
- Is this dog "ball crazy?"
- What "holes" does the dog have that make it unsuitable for you to keep for yourself? In other words, why are you trying to sell me this dog?
- Does the dog display any aggressive tendencies? Either dog aggression or fear aggression?
- Is this dog thunder-phobic or afraid of any other loud noises that may affect its working ability and safe handling?
- Can we take the dog on a trial basis? (One month is customary.)
- Will you train us on how to handle the dog in the field on our site?
- What will you do for us if the dog doesn't work out? Replace it with a suitable animal? Retrain it?
- Has your dog ever competed successfully in any other dog sport? (Sheepherding, agility, etc.) If so, why are you selling it now for goose work?

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