

# PETA Leader Speaks Out



A player herself, wildlife biologist Stephanie Boyles lauds the golf industry to a degree while noting that superintendents could do a better job, especially when it comes to removing Canada geese

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Stephanie Boyles has been a wildlife biologist with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) for eight years. Although she's only been playing golf for two years, she's already broken 90. In this Q&A, Boyles clarifies what PETA ([www.helpingwildlife.com](http://www.helpingwildlife.com)) has to offer and suggests solutions to the elusive Canada Goose problem. She is based in PETA's Norfolk, Va., office and gladly accepts calls (757-622-7382) from those looking for more effective and humane ways to handle wildlife issues.

**Can you talk about the 1998 wildlife damage control questionnaire that you sent to 15,000 golf course superintendents and what perspective you gained from it?**

I asked superintendents what types of prob-

lems, if any, they encounter with wild animals, what methods they use to solve these problems, and how effective these methods were in reducing or eliminating damage. Thanks to those who completed the questionnaire, we discovered that superintendents deal with a variety of animals, including alligators, armadillos, bears, beavers, chipmunks, coots, coyotes, cranes, crows, deer, elk, foxes, gophers, ground squirrels, moles, moose, muskrats, opossums, prairie dogs, rabbits, raccoons, skunks, snakes, snapping turtles, squirrels and woodchucks among others. However, without a doubt, the animals that superintendents contend with more than all of the others combined are Canada geese. We also learned that there are four common methods used by superintendents to control Canada geese on golf courses: harassment with trained dog teams, adding eggs (contraception), controlled hunts and roundups.

In July, when Canada geese shed their feathers and grow new ones (a process known





**Canada geese, while the bane of superintendents, have a friend in PETA wildlife biologist Stephanie Boyles (bottom right).**

information on ways to effectively and permanently keep geese away from fairways and greens through the development and implementation of integrated Canada goose management programs that include habitat-modification strategies, repellents, fencing, frightening devices, reproductive controls such as egg addling and public education programs (that discourage people from feeding the birds).

**PETA has been “branded” as an extreme activist group by some. Yet anyone who looks beyond the rhetoric sees that PETA offers sound solutions to problems and considers all sides of an issue. What kind of response have you gotten from the golf industry?**

When a PETA member sends me a news clip about a golf course that’s planning to round up Canada geese, the first thing I do is call the superintendent. I tell him or her that I’m PETA’s wildlife biologist, have developed wildlife control strategies for several golf courses and would like to offer my assistance in helping the course develop a program to solve the goose problem without killing the birds — free of charge. At first, superintendents are skeptical — not because I work for PETA but because in most cases they think they’ve already tried everything and doubt I have anything to bring to the table that they haven’t already seen before. I sense their hesitation and disbelief — that’s when I tell them about North Ridge Country Club in Raleigh, N.C.

In July 2001 the North Ridge Country Club was just days away from rounding up and killing more than 150 Canada geese that were living on the club’s golf course.

At the last minute North Ridge officials agreed to meet with representatives of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Wake County, Geese-

*Continued on page 50*

as molting), the birds temporarily lose the ability to fly. It’s during this time of year, when the birds are vulnerable and have no way to flee from danger, that golf courses hire federal agents and/or wildlife-control operators to herd the geese into crates and either gas them or send them to processing plants to be slaughtered and butchered. Roundups cause immeasurable stress — separating lifetime mates from each other and from their young goslings. (Watch footage of USDA-Wildlife Services rounding up Canada geese at [www.petatu.com/tvpopup/Prefs.asp?video=canad\\_a\\_goose](http://www.petatu.com/tvpopup/Prefs.asp?video=canad_a_goose).)

Besides being cruel, in most cases superintendents indicated that killing the geese did not solve the problem. That wasn’t surprising. As long as the areas of concern remain attractive and accessible to these birds, more will simply move in from surrounding areas to fill the newly vacant niche, resulting in a perpetual, vicious roundup-and-kill cycle. In response, we sent superintendents





## PETA Leader Speaks Out

*Continued from page 49*

peace ([www.geesepeace.org](http://www.geesepeace.org)) and PETA to discuss the possibility of implementing a program that would rid the golf course of waterfowl in two weeks without killing the birds. Thanks to our combined efforts, North Ridge was free of geese in less than two days without killing a single goose and has remained goose-free for the last four years.

At this point, most superintendents are relieved. They don't relish the idea of killing these animals. Their intentions aren't malicious. I mean, some superintendents may not be particularly fond of animals and may have no empathy for Canada geese whatsoever. However, in my experience, I have found that most superintendents are extremely fond of animals, especially wild animals, and given the choice between implementing an effective, humane, environmentally friendly and cost-beneficial program (like the Geesepeace program) and doing something as ineffective, cruel and controversial as rounding and killing these animals, they will choose the former rather than the latter. Not to mention, superintendents and groundskeepers feel an enormous sense of accomplishment when they are able to solve problems with these animals without having to kill them.

**Golf still gets a bad rap environmentally, yet golf courses often serve as refuges for rare wildlife and most superintendents are sensitive to wildlife issues. In your view, how are golf courses doing from the perspective of wildlife preservation?**

Golf courses do get a bad rap and most environmentalists agree that it's well-founded. A typical course uses astounding amounts of water — enough to supply a small town. They can generate more pollution from fertilizers and insecticides than a working farm. Golf courses take up as much acreage in the United States as Rhode Island and Delaware combined, with more courses opening each month.

Many people dwell on the negative

Everything from pheasant to alligators to woodchucks inhabit golf courses.



impact that golf courses have on the environment, but I think it's also important to keep things in perspective. Golf courses are far more wildlife-friendly and bio-diverse than parking lots and strip malls, but that's hardly a fair comparison. Thankfully, a small but increasing number of courses aren't satisfied with the status quo either and are seeking eco-friendly certification from organizations like Audubon International, which requires that facilities undergo a multi-step process to improve water conservation, create wildlife habitat and reduce chemical use. Also, Arnold Palmer and other pros are promoting new, environmentally sound management practices and encouraging golf course architects to return to the origins of golf and create course designs that follow the natural shape of the land.

Problem is, the Audubon program is completely voluntary and though their standards are strict, the program is intended to educate superintendents, not regulate them. Some in the golf industry believe the only way to alter the negative public perception of golf courses is to establish minimum standards for construction, water usage, plants, wildlife habitat, fertilizers and pesticides to which facilities must adhere. The Environmental Institute for Golf is taking on this challenge and hopefully will pave the future of golf course management.

**As a golfer yourself, what kind of things would you like to see the golf industry do in the future to enhance its image environmentally?**

Whenever I learn about plans to develop a new golf course in my area, I'm often tempted to call the architect and say, "Remember: If you build it, they will come." The "they" I'm referring to isn't a group of famous phantom golfers but the Canada geese, ducks, rabbits, squirrels, foxes, raccoons, and other animals that will quickly make the new golf course their home. As stated previously, with the golf industry moving toward more wildlife and environmentally friendly designs, architects and superintendents must anticipate problems since these phenomenal courses are bound to attract animals other than the intended guests. When that happens (and it will), the golf industry must commit itself to co-existing with these animals that are merely responding to an invitation.

It's not enough to create wildlife habitat — we must be able to foresee potential problems and do all we can to co-exist peacefully with animals that take refuge on golf courses. For starters, prevention is better than a cure. It's more effective and cost-beneficial to use preventive techniques before animals become established. For example, with assistance from wildlife control experts, golf course architects can

*Continued on page 52*



## PETA Leader Speaks Out

*Continued from page 50*

incorporate strategically placed vegetation, rock and fence barriers to keep Canada geese from congregating in areas of concern, and superintendents can apply for federal permits to humanely render eggs “unhatchable” should a pair of geese nest on the course.

Also, the goal should always be wildlife damage reduction, not elimination. Just as eco-friendly golf courses like Widow's Walk in Massachusetts and Desert Willow in California have to contend with a few brown spots on their greens to minimize water usage, so superintendents must learn to accept goose poop on the greens from time to time.

You can download the manual — it's called *Habitat Modification and Canada geese: Techniques for Mitigating Human/Goose Conflicts in Urban and Suburban Environments* — at [www.animalalliance.ca/article.php?article=canada\\_geese&dir=projects&title=Canada+Geese](http://www.animalalliance.ca/article.php?article=canada_geese&dir=projects&title=Canada+Geese).

There are some also new concepts that are not included, such as the recent development of an oral waterfowl contraception drug (also one for pigeons) called Ovocontrol by a company called Innolytics ([www.innolyticsllc.com/information](http://www.innolyticsllc.com/information)). But other than that, most of the information is current.

### **You recently played some desert courses. Your thoughts on the experience both as a golfer and as someone concerned about wildlife?**

I'm a wildlife biologist, but like many people, I'm chained to a PC most of the workweek, and on weekends I only venture outdoors a short distance from my home. When I take a week off from work, I usually plan adventures to national parks where I can really lose myself in a place I've never been before. I love taking long hikes in the wilderness, using my field guides to identify and learn the names and features of plants and animals that make the area unique, and of course, watching every bird, mammal, reptile, amphibian, fish and bug I can spot with my own eyes or my trusty binoculars. I



Conscientious golfers “cannot ignore” the fact that courses must respect the very wildlife it invites by nature, PETA representative Stephanie Boyles says.

spent my last vacation in Yellowstone and it was breathtaking. The landscape, the thermal features, the wildlife — it was unbelievable.

When I decided to spend this year's vacation in Scottsdale, Ariz., I thought I'd have to choose between playing spectacular golf courses and exploring the wilds of the Sonoran Desert. Needless to say, I was in for a very pleasant surprise. I mean, I didn't have to choose — I got to do both. Don't get me wrong: Watching wildlife and admiring the desert landscape from a golf car isn't the same as hiking up to Cathedral Rock, but I was still amazed at the diversity of plants and animals I was able to enjoy while playing a round of golf. We saw hummingbirds, cactus wrens, coyotes, thrashers, rabbits, ground squirrels, quail, flickers, foxes, javalinas, doves, deer, golden eagles, verdin, phainopepla, violet green swallows and roadrunners — to name a few.

On our first day, we were waiting to tee off on the back nine when a coyote trotted up to a shady area above a green next to us and nonchalantly laid his body down for a snooze. I was so excited and asked the folks playing with us if people ever complain about animals like coyotes living on or near golf courses communities. They

laughed. “Nonsense! For goodness sake, that's why we live here! Isn't that why you came to Arizona to play golf? To see the desert and all the wildlife?” I laughed and replied, “Oh, of course!” [laugh]

No question about it — I had a great time, but I'm no fool. I know one of the reasons those desert courses are so overwhelmingly attractive to wildlife is because we take water from natural, self-sustaining riparian ecosystems and use it to maintain artificial, 120-acre man-made “systems” carefully designed for people like me who enjoy chasing and hitting little white balls with sticks. The plants and animals in those natural systems struggle to survive and those fortunate enough to live close to these artificial “systems” thrive. As conscientious golfers, we cannot ignore this fact. We are morally obligated to petition the golf industry to be proactive and strike some sort of balance with what the industry takes from wildlife and the environment. If nothing else, we should support golf courses that have been certified by Audubon International as often as possible. The Audubon program isn't perfect, but it's the best we've got for now and we should patronize facilities that are investing time and resources to participate in the program. ■