

Canada Geese

Environmental Report from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System

The long V-shaped flight and distinctive honking of Canada geese have long been synonymous with the coming of spring and fall. Canada geese are well recognized throughout the country and are becoming semi-domesticated in urban parks and golf courses with lakes, ponds or wetlands. Here they find plenty of water, food and nesting sites that are relatively safe from predators.

Canada geese are grazing birds that feed on both wild and cultivated plants. They eat the rhizomes, roots, shoots, stems, blades and seeds 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 nest in a wide variety of habitats, but prefer sites with an open view: open fields near water, on islands, rocky cliffs, even in large tree cavities or artificial nest structures such as old tires. On the golf course, manicured water features provide a good view for nesting geese, while grass is plentiful forage. 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 show strong nest site fidelity and often return to the same spot year after year if they are successful in raising young. Geese raise an average of 4-7 goslings each year.

Because of their size, intelligence and wariness, geese are less subject to predation than most other waterfowl. Hawks and owls prey on immatures and some adults, and snapping turtles, snakes and land-based predators take goslings which stray from parental protection. Parasites, diseases and accidents also take their toll. The life span of Canada geese is potentially 15-20 years, though on average, geese live about seven to nine years.

Around the turn of the century, populations of Canada Geese were drastically reduced by unrestricted market hunting on wintering grounds and migration routes. However, over the last 40 years, numbers have rebounded due to wildlife management, law enforcement and farming practices. Today, geese are protected by law, and it is illegal to destroy nests, eggs, young or adults without special state permission.

In recent years, wildlife biologists have identified a change in Canada goose populations and 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 subarctic 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, agricul-

tural practices and altered natural environments may all be linked to changing population dynamics of Canada geese.


Controlling Canada Geese

Canada geese are perceived by many golfers and superintendents to be a nuisance on the golf course. Their feces can leave a substantial mess which must be cleaned regularly and they are not easily deterred from going about their business. Many courses 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 somehow made the course home.

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

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

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Evaluate the Problem

Try to define the problem specifically. Are geese obstructing the golf game or is their excrement causing complaints? Is the problem occurring only in certain areas? Is goose feeding or feces causing turf damage? Are you dealing with resident geese or a migratory population? Your method of control will be most effective if you define the problem, narrow down zones of damage and effectively communicate with golfers.

Survey Your Course

Survey your course to determine how you might actually be **encouraging** geese. Where are geese problems most prevalent? Do these places have open water that borders an in-play area? Do you mow grass right down to the shoreline, thus providing geese with the view they prefer? If the answer is Yes, then you are providing great geese habitat.

Feeding Geese

Do any golfers or homeowners feed geese? Have they done so in the past? If this is the case, the geese on your course have probably grown used to people and their numbers may have increased due to the artificial food supply.

Nesting

Are geese nesting on the property? Where? How many pairs are raising young? If geese are just starting to get established and there are only one or two pairs, now is the time to think about goose control.

Migration

Do geese seem to be a problem only in fall and spring? Do you have large flocks landing on your lakes or ponds in autumn? This indicates that your course is being used during migration. In the fall, family groups gather in small flocks, leave their breeding grounds and fly to "staging areas" along the route south. These "staging areas" of open water habitat provide a place for geese to rest and feed between long flights. If geese are mainly using your course during migration, time is on your side and patience is warranted. Before long, the geese will move on.

Wintering

Are geese primarily spending the winter on your course? If this is the case, you are likely providing habitat for a migratory goose population.

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 course, 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 course. 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 golfers and maintenance personnel.

Choose the Most Effective Control Measure For Your Situation

Control measures fall roughly into three categories: barrier methods, scare tactics and intervention. Some combination of these may prove most successful. Remember, 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.

Barriers

- **Monofilament line or wire.** 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 courses 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. The string will not interfere with golf play, but will deter geese from easily walking onto the course.

- **Aquatic vegetation.** Rather than mow right to the water's edge, plant aquatic vegetation around lake and pond margins. This helps to disrupt the expansive view, acts

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as a physical barrier and provides excellent habitat for other more desirable wading birds and wildlife.

Scare Tactics

• **Explosives.** Explosives have been tried with very limited success. Usually, geese will fly away for awhile and then return when things calm down. In addition, the very effectiveness of explosives — noise — will not only disturb geese, but golf course neighbors and golfers themselves. Unless you're interested in putting on a fireworks display every morning, choose another method.

• **Bird scare tape.** 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.

• **Pistol launcher.** A single-shot pistol launcher, similar to a starter's pistol, can be used to frighten geese. Diligence is important with this method. Geese must be stalked in the early morning or evening until they feel threatened for their safety and leave.

• **Dogs.** Many superintendents have successfully used dogs to chase or stalk the birds. The gently, but energetic nature of the English setter makes this dog a good choice. If you are interested in finding out more about English setters, contact Charles Martineau at Whippoorwill Country Club, 150 Whippoorwill Road, Armonk, New York 10504, telephone (914) 273-3755. Mr. Martineau breeds and trains English setters, and has found them to be most effective in dealing with Canada Geese on his golf course.

Intervention

When other control methods have failed and golfers will no longer tolerate geese on the course, local authorities should be contacted to help you deal with Canada geese. Your local department of wildlife 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 without a permit. Canada geese are protected by law. Not only may your course pay large fines for killing geese, the resulting negative publicity can be devastating for your course and your profession.

Education

If geese are a problem on your golf course, you must not only deal with the geese, you must also effectively deal with golfers. Communicate what you know about Canada geese natural history and goose control. Use your newsletter to let people know what strategies you have employed or plan to implement to minimize nuisance or damage.

Finally, recognize that you are not alone. Many superintendents are struggling with the same problem. Encourage golfing organizations to which you belong to open a dialogue with the U.S. Department of Fish & Wildlife. 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 observations can result in positive progress toward striking a balance between golf and geese.

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