

TURFGRASS MATTERS

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A Year in the Life of a Golf Course Dog

by Clay Craft

Golf courses face a number of challenging maintenance tasks. One problem that has drawn the attention of golfers is the mess left by Canada Geese. Populations of federally protected Canada geese have become a major topic of discussion. Recently, a short resident Canada goose hunting season has been implemented in Delaware, but this has done little to curb populations on many local golf courses. There are several management techniques that are used for combating goose problems, and none are absolute. I will focus on the use of dogs, especially Border Collies, to chase off Canada Geese on the course. The purpose of this article will be to inform you of what is involved in the care and training of a Border Collie in your quest to manage goose problems at your facility. I can provide a first hand view of what I have gone through in caring for and training my 14 month old Border Collie, Marley, at Cripple Creek Golf and CC near Bethany Beach, DE.

The Problem

Increasing resident Canada goose populations at our facility forced us to devise a management plan to reduce their numbers. There are many reasons that they are not a desired wildlife on the property. The first reason is the incredible amount of waste that they produce. The average Canada goose will deposit one and a half pounds of waste per day. You can only imagine the amount of goose waste produced daily, even in a relatively small population of 20 to 30 geese. The second problem is the fearlessness of the resident birds. With very few natural predators and a limited hunting season the geese will continue to stay in the same place



and nest year after year. The offspring called "goslings" then stay on the property and produce offspring of their own the following year. If left unchecked only a few Canada geese will become many in just a few years. This problem is compounded by the abundance of green foliage to eat on the course, and the compulsion of some people to feed them.

The Solution

Several approaches can be used to manage these birds. Use of repellent sprays will work, but this can be offensive to golfers, especially in this age of pesticide paranoia. Superintendent Bob Collins, CGCS tried the rope around the pond method with little success. After discussing the option of a Border Collie with Bob, he gave me the OK in March of 2000. I had little trouble finding a nine week-old pup within a few days, and named her Marley. Marley began coming to work with me immediately and going home with me at night. I paid for the dog,

because if I ever leave the facility I will take her with me. These are loyal and extremely social dogs that need human interaction at all times. If their master ever leaves them there is a good chance that the dog will become worthless for work. Some courses will provide a nice place for the dog to stay in the shop or a well insulated dog house. This is the case when the golf course budget is used for the purchase and care of the dog. In my case I purchased the dog and paid for vet bills as the initial startup costs. My golf facility now pays for the food and some other small costs associated with her upkeep.

Training

Some training should begin immediately if you are to train the dog yourself, although some people find it easier and more convenient to send the dog off for training. In my case I trained the dog by myself. I did attend a basic obedience training class, which is usually available through local kennel clubs or private trainers. The Border Collie

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Marley, *continued from page 1*

is an amazing dog to work with when training. They pick up things much faster than most breeds. Marley was house broken in about a week (10 weeks old). Other basic commands were also learned quickly, such as sit, down, and shake.

Once the basic obedience is learned you can get to the important things. For the dog to interact with golfers without distracting them while they play is the first lesson. Don't let them play with golf balls for starters. You can imagine someone's reaction if a dog runs off with their ball as they line up a 3 foot birdie putt. Border Collies are quiet dogs that don't bark much. This is a desired attribute that fits in well on the golf course. Teach the dog the property boundaries and let them know where they are not allowed. A good tool to use is a whistle. If you teach them to stop and return at your whistle, it could save their life some day.

Strategy

Resident populations of Canada geese have become a problem for Cripple Creek, though not yet a major one. Discouraging their presence is how our program could best be described. In the past, canoes and kayaks were employed to try to harass the birds. Also, they have been captured and removed from time to time. However, our persistence in the endeavor has always waned as the season became busier, and likewise, the population increased at a time when manpower was at a premium.

As we have not yet been able to train Marley to mow rough

(and Bob has threatened to do so), she was able to keep up with the geese throughout the spring. Despite busy golf schedules, maintenance practices, and neighbors feeding the flock, Marley's efforts have kept the population to about twenty birds; not bad for a course that has over 20 acres of water spread out over eleven of its eighteen holes.

A Fixture

Marley has also become one of the favorites around the course. She is welcomed in the clubhouse (Chef Charles often finds great treats for her), plays soccer with the pro shop staff and is always up for throwing a football around the Maintenance Yard at quitting time. She accompanies me when I play golf in the afternoons. At first, I was hesitant about taking her while I played, but this has actually helped discourage the geese because they had grown to associate my gasoline cart with Marley. Now, they do not know if any group of golfers could mean persistent harassment. Bob and some of the members have enjoyed playing a round with Marley!

Because she is a house pet, I do not have the embarrassing scenes that "kennel dogs" sometimes have with strangers. She has never snarled nor bit anyone. Like many house pets, she thinks she is a "people" and is completely comfortable around them. She especially likes to visit Mike Eder on the Lesco Truck and jump on USGA Agronomist Darin Bevard's clean golf slacks. She is accepted as part of our golfing community.

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