



By Holly Hazard

Hearing *honk honk honk* in early spring or late fall always caused my siblings and me to look to the sky to find that familiar V formation of Canada geese flying north for the winter or south for the summer. I didn't realize how special that vision was and how close to extinction those birds became during my teenage years.

In a misguided attempt to prevent that extinction 30 years ago, wildlife managers and hunting clubs initiated a program that unleashed an unnatural population of birds in urban environments along the Eastern seaboard and throughout the Midwest. This new population of geese, called "resident" Canada geese, did not have the instinct to migrate, and therefore became a part of the urban/suburban landscape.

As their numbers grow by 20% a year, they are increasingly called a "nuisance" by homeowners, managers of parks, industrial and commercial sites. Geese leave their droppings along beaches, in the water, on lawns and in fountains in such volume as to render green space unusable by the individual property owners.

Because of this growing conflict, property managers and wildlife officials throughout the United States have begun programs to reduce the numbers of these "resident" geese, while initiating programs to increase

the populations of their migrating cousins. As with most wildlife conflicts, the geese become the losers in their own "management." The first reaction of wildlife managers is to kill the problem. However, unlike deer or beaver or other so-called "nuisance"

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animals, hunting geese, at least in the area where they've become a problem, is not possible. The idea of hunters traipsing through county parks and fountains, entering subdivisions with ponds, rifles in tow, is something that even the most ardent "outdoorsman" has not suggested.

Instead, our U.S. Department of Agriculture has come up with another method for eliminating the nuisance, that is to round up and trap the geese and send them off to a slaughterhouse.

This strategy has been shown to be both divisive and ineffective in resolving the problem. Rounding up geese where the habitat remains appealing, simply means that other geese in this overpopulated area will move in.

This past year the community in which I live had just such an issue with geese slowly overtaking our lake. At our annual civic association meeting a chorus of neighbors demanded that "something" be done. They complained that their lawns were uninhabitable, that swimming in the lake was unhealthy and that they feared for the safety of children on our beaches. When one woman stood up to declare that we should "kill all the geese" she received a round of applause. When residents, including myself, objected to plans to round up and kill the animals, the association decided to take a second look at what options might be available.

With the guidance of the chair of the environmental committee of our community association and with the help of the wildlife department at The Humane Society of the United States, we launched a 17-point plan to reduce the nuisance aspect of geese without resorting to lethal methods that would divide our community, pitting neighbor against neighbor. We organized a group called "GeesePeace" to test various methods of encouraging geese to move on without trapping them.

These techniques included plastic owls and shimmering strings, repellent sprays, movement detectors that shoot a spray of water, landscaping and Border collies. We found some techniques worked better than others, and some, widely touted as solutions, didn't work at all.

Our most successful program was the use of Border collies, retrained from herding sheep, to irritate the geese as they moved around the lake until they decided to move on. The dogs never came within 15 feet of a goose and we didn't use them during the molting season when the geese are unable to fly. Our lake went from a resident population of over 100 to under 10 by summer's end.

We were so successful with this program that I have now brought one of the collies into my home where she will reside with my family and go out to "work" with volunteers during the spring and summer, as needed, to encourage the geese to visit but not to stay.

We also continued a program begun years earlier called egg "addling" that renders geese eggs infertile and therefore prevents development. Addling involves either replacing the egg with a fake one or "oiling" an egg. On a humane level it is similar to the spay/neuter campaign we have for dogs and cats. If we can prevent one gosling from being born, it is one less goose likely to be rounded up for slaughter.

We found our comprehensive program to be highly effective and have essentially eliminated the problem in our community without causing conflict with our neighbors or harming any geese.

Due to the success of our program we decided to launch a pilot program for egg addling county-wide. Because the resident Canada geese in our communities are distinct from

their migratory cousins (in that they live with us year-round), with comprehensive addling programs we have a real opportunity to have a sig-



Debbie Marshall and her trained Border collies scan the Lake Barcroft horizon for geese.

Photo: Holly Hazard

nificant impact on reducing the numbers of geese within a community in a relatively short time period. This may be a chance for the humane community to launch a program for dealing effectively and humanely with wildlife issues before it becomes a crisis and the so-called wildlife managers come in with a "shotgun" solution. In our community, we contacted



John Hadidian of The Humane Society of the United States tests a non-toxic geese repellent.

Photo: Holly Hazard

our legislators, parks and recreation department, golf courses, schools, civic associations, anywhere we have grass and water, to make them aware of this effective solution.

We identified the potential sites in our county using the Geographical Information System available for the county. This system allows us to identify potential sites from satellite imaging and to document our project through computer technology. We are not only solving our problem, but piloting a research program that can be replicated throughout the country.

Egg addling can only work if it is done in a comprehensive manner throughout a community and it is supported by the affected public and private interests including golf courses, public schools,

industrial parks, commercial sites, government land, and private residential sites that have both ponds and a significant amount of green space. By uniting government agencies, private commercial interests and the humane community we have the possibility of leading the way to a more reasoned approach to dealing with wildlife issues that not only is effective in solving the problem, but strengthens our communities instead of tearing them apart.

GeesePeace founder David Feld had a vision in the spring of 1999 that wildlife issues don't need to be the source of community friction. Their solutions can be used to build communities by bringing the energy of diverse groups together to create opportunities that go beyond solving the problem. In our own case, these included Wildlife Appreciation Day, designing and implementing computer-based geographical information systems to work with environmental programs, teaching children about humane solutions to wildlife conflicts, and protecting, not harming, the animals who share our community.

If you would like more information about bringing GeesePeace to your community, please visit GeesePeace at www.geesepeace.com. 🐾