

G E E S E

Five Years of Success: Activists Join to Make

By Holly Hazard

Many of us remember our first sighting of the “V” formation of Canada Geese flying North or South as one the first signs of the turning of the seasons. Due to extreme over-hunting, by the mid 1900s, some races of this majestic, intriguing bird, including the Giant Canada Goose, were in danger of extinction and protected under an international treaty. In the 1950s and 60s wildlife managers began a comprehensive program to bring these animals back from the brink through relocation of pairs of birds throughout the four migratory flyways. Seldom has a wildlife management plan been so successful, or, some would say, so misguided. As the birds made their comeback, they failed to take up the migratory traits of their ancestors and became instead permanent fixtures on our growing suburban landscape. The neatly shaped lawns, plentiful golf courses and commercial ponds and fountains that have drawn the middle class to suburbia are also the dream environments for resident Canada Geese.

As their population has grown (some estimate at 15% a year), so has the level of aggravation—not with the geese, but with what they leave behind. Notoriously inefficient processors of food, geese produce an estimated one to three pounds of fecal material a day. Before this process occurs, they must first eat the equivalent amount of beautifully manicured grass from a soccer field, golf course or carefully maintained lawn. Canada Geese have soiled walkways and docks, fouled the water and, because of unauthorized feeding, become a nuisance at picnic and toddler play areas.

Homeowners have abandoned their lakefront lawns, and soccer players, joggers and golfers have become increasingly frustrated at the growing amount of fecal matter on their recreation areas...and their shoes. Managers of parks, beaches, commercial buildings and homeowner associations have tried everything, ranging from firecrackers to swans, and dogs to laser guns, to rid their property of unwanted birds. Once the frustration builds to an unacceptable level, management begins to explore lethal options for eliminating the problem. Invariably, then, the protectors of the geese step forward, prepared, if necessary

to sacrifice their own lives, or at least their goodwill, in defense of the geese. Communities break down, friendships are lost, and business relationships are damaged, all due to the misguided belief that, in the end, the only solution to wildlife conflict is to kill the wildlife through a roundup and slaughter program.

This community breakdown became very personal to me in the spring of 1998, when my community determined that the only way to deal with the rising numbers of geese was to round them up and kill them. Several of us protested that we had moved to this community because of a love of wildlife and we would not see them harmed in our name.

Under the leadership of David Feld, the then president of our Association, we formed a committee of stakeholders from all sides to develop a program to solve the problem but to build, not destroy, our community in the process. We looked at over 17 potential solutions, some effective, some ineffective and some just plain silly, to develop a cost effective, humane solution...and it worked. We were then written up in the *Washington Post* for our unique program and calls for help came in from around the country. David Feld and I formed the non-profit GeesePeace, with the help of the Doris Day Animal Foundation, to take our ideas to any community interested in an innovative and effective solution to wildlife conflicts.

Through several years of successful Canada Geese site aversion programs, GeesePeace has found that not only is the lethal option divisive, it is also ineffective. Because the environment which attracted the geese remains untouched, another happy flock soon replaces those geese removed for slaughter, often within just a few weeks. A community is then left with a hefty bill for the round up, the same number of geese, and an angry, divided community.

GeesePeace has developed a comprehensive, community-based program that uses proven population stabilization and site aversion techniques, in combinations unique to each community or site, that are 100% effective in controlling the resident population, and which build, not divide, communities.

Population stabilization, through an egg-oiling program, which renders geese eggs infertile and therefore prevents development, is a significant factor in successful

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programs for three reasons. First, it ensures that a community is doing all it can to prevent an even bigger problem in the coming years. Because an estimated three goslings survive their first year from every successful nest, and because there are so few predators of adult geese, each additional gosling has the potential to add significantly to the problem during his or her 20-year life span. Also, egg oiling reduces the loyalty of adult geese to a specific site for future nesting and molting. When geese have a failed nesting season, some of these geese may fly north in a “molt migration,” thus reducing the number of geese in the nesting area and surrounding regions for the whole summer and fall seasons. Finally, oiling breaks the biological necessity for adult geese to stay at a particular site through molting season (late July). Because geese tend to be more of a nuisance in spring and summer, and because this is the time when goslings are born and are tended to by parent geese, the lack of goslings means the parent geese can be herded and flushed from the area. Otherwise, they will remain at the nesting area until at least early August when their goslings are first able to fly.

David Feld and I, along with the communities in which we piloted the program, spent four years testing combinations of options on a variety of properties with a variety of property uses. Some successful strategies are counter-intuitive. For example, communities wanting to have a nuisance-free summer need to allow Canada Geese nesting on their site so that nests can be easily located. Chasing geese results in the geese nesting nearby and the community getting walk-in goslings.

Some other commonly promoted strategies are a waste of money. No one has ever been satisfied with the purchase of a plastic owl except the person who sold it. The significant factors in failed programs are the myriad schemes available that don't work (swans, plastic owls), or the options that may work in combination with other options (chemicals, landscaping), but are expensive or ineffective on their own.

Top: The Massapequa, NY, cluster, Kevin King, Anthony Scali, John Venditto, Tom Suozzi and Mary Liebau, pose with their Border collies. Middle: Matt Nolan and Mary Liebau at work with their Border collie. Bottom: GeesePeace receives a citation from the Town of Hempstead in Nassau County, New York, for its significant contributions benefiting wildlife and the environment. From left: Town of Oyster Bay Supervisor John Venditto, DDAL Executive Director Holly Hazard, GeesePeace President David Feld, Town of Hempstead Supervisor Kate Murray, and Commissioner of Parks, Recreation and Museums Doreen Banks.



The second component of a successful program is site aversion. Options for successful site aversion are developed in a “toolbox” approach that includes the use of a trained Border collie to ensure that birds learn that a site, including its water bodies, is no longer safe, a community cluster program and landscape modifications. Often, a property owner reads that hiring a Border collie service will solve his problem. If they have the funds to hire a service, they may solve the problem on their site, but they increase it for everyone else. The GeesePeace program looks at the community of sites and uses aggressive tactics to move the birds out of the area, not just to a neighbor who can’t afford a service.

GeesePeace has eliminated the frustrations and ultimately witnessed the victories of the managers of communities, parks and recreational facilities who felt doomed to retreat from their green space after one failure after another until they heard about the GeesePeace program and took the time and energy to fully understand and implement its provisions.

The GeesePeace program, for which DDAL has provided significant funding in 2004, had an exemplary season. Our New Jersey shore program was in its first full year of operation providing a humane and effective solution to resident Canada Geese issues for six shore communities. We started programs in West Virginia and continued to assist communities that had previously implemented programs throughout the country including Massachusetts, Illinois and Missouri and Upstate New York.

Through the extraordinary efforts of the GeesePeace President, David Feld, who literally moved to Nassau County in New York from his home in Virginia to oversee the project for most of the year, GeesePeace launched the most ambitious program yet for managing urban wildlife in a humane, non-controversial and effective man-



Above: GeesePeace volunteers locate a nest, such as this one, and oil each egg as part of the population stabilization program. Right: Public education is an important component of a successful GeesePeace program. These “No feeding” signs are designed to educate, not admonish the public, so people understand that feeding wildlife is not doing them a service and contributes greatly to unacceptable numbers of birds on one site.

ner. Through its population stabilization program, over 1,400 eggs were oiled. This translates into 14,000 fewer adult birds in the county over an eight-year period.

While other communities are attempting to solve the problem through divisive and ineffective strategies such as round ups or special hunts, the GeesePeace pilot program in Nassau reduced the nuisance aspect of resident geese without killing or injuring the adult birds.

Communities throughout Nassau formed community clusters which worked across jurisdictional boundaries to encourage geese to move away from nuisance sites such as jogging paths, ponds, school yards and soccer fields. Using a trained Border collie and several seasonal workers, the GeesePeace pilot provided relief to over 20 sites in the county and provided a framework for a roll out of the program throughout the county next year.

In November 2004, The GeesePeace program received a citation from the town of Hempstead, one of the three towns in Nassau County, for being an “outstanding organization.” (See photo on page 11.) The town recognized the “significant contributions and untiring devotion of GeesePeace” benefiting wildlife and our environment. The contributions of the Doris Day Animal League in terms of funding and staff time was well spent and will assist in providing a framework for humane urban wildlife management that can be replicated throughout the country.

For more information on GeesePeace and its programs, please visit www.geesepeace.org. 

