

THE CONTROL OF CANADA GEESE

'We all know the scenario - urban pond, lots of tame waterfowl, people love to feed them. Thus, pea soup and slippery paths'. This is the heading for a discussion thread on the 'Naturenet' website www.naturenet.net. Paul Finn, Head Ranger with Derbyshire County Council has widened his contribution to the debate into an article on managing the impacts of Canada Geese

First of all, let me state that I don't claim to know everything about this subject, or any other for that matter, but it always seems to me to be a good idea to share experience. So here's mine.

THE PROBLEM

One of the sites I managed in a previous job had a large lake. It was a partially reclaimed site close to an urban area and was very popular with visitors. As well as the lake, the site included wet woodland, plantations, reedbed, unimproved calcareous grassland and $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of river. There was a wide range of flora and fauna including water vole, brook lamprey, white-clawed crayfish and an excellent bird species list.

However, in summer the lake tended towards eutrophication, with algal blooms (not usually blue-green) and occasionally fish deaths due to low oxygen. The causes were nitrate runoff from intensive agriculture upstream, hotter weather, more UV's, reduced inflow from the river and bird muck – lots of it. The chief culprits were the large numbers of Canada geese, which, as we all know, are superb nutrient-making machines. In one end goes the bank vegetation, farmers' crops or bread (feeding the geese was a popular activity) and out the other end comes nutrient making for a very unpleasant walking experience for Rangers and visitors. Thanks mainly to the Canadas, bank erosion was severe in places and several of the lake islands had no ground flora at all.

Luckily, there was no fishing, so there were not huge amounts of ground bait adding more nutrients and there was no financial imperative to maximise income from selling bird feed. So, unlike many urban settings, there wasn't much of a rat problem.

The Canadas brought unexpected problems too. One day an extremely indignant man marched into my office. His house overlooked a pond in an urban park some miles away, and he took a somewhat proprietorial interest in the wildlife there. He demanded that I control my geese better to prevent them flying to his pond and bullying his birds. He could prove the miscreants were mine because he'd watched them flying in and out and taken a compass bearing. Of course, I thanked him for his concern and promised to have a stern word with the offending geese. Another satisfied customer.

TAKING CONTROL, TEMPORARILY!

Something had to be done – about the Canadas, not the indignant man. As usual we approached the problem from both sides and looked both at methods of controlling geese numbers and at positive visitor management to reduce feeding. I'll concentrate on the former.

I researched the problem looking at what solutions had been tried at other sites. I found that since Canada geese like to walk out of the water to their nests, if you create a barrier to prevent them doing so they will not nest. One successful solution I saw was a strand of wire suspended a few inches above the water surface just offshore.

I felt we could use this idea, but make it more sustainable by using material generated on site. Our woodland management operations produced plenty of timber suitable for the posts, which we placed in two rows. We then wedged sheaves of reed (cut from the adjacent reedbed which was managed on rotation) between them to form a goose-proof barrier. I was very pleased with my idea.

The Canadas were pleased with my idea, too. Far from being deterred, the geese took the reed as nesting material. Moorhens nested on the barrier. The bit about our work that fascinates me the most is the way nature doesn't keep to the rules. We write the books, but nature doesn't seem to read them. We've all seen examples. Like the kestrel taking a blue tit from just above the ground or grey squirrels proving that the squirrel proof bird box isn't or hedge stakes growing better than a newly laid hedge

The Canada geese numbers had to be reduced. We obtained an English Nature licence and began pricking the eggs with a 6 inch nail and replacing them on the nest. If the eggs are not replaced the goose will lay more, so the trick is not to let the goose know what you've done. After that first year we improved our method by using paraffin. Put some paraffin in a plastic bag, place the egg in the bag and bathe it in the paraffin, before replacing the egg on the nest. By using the non-smelly paraffin from the chemist the geese remained unaware that the eggs were not viable and continued sit on them rather than laying a new batch.

A FEW CAVEATS

This sort of action, just like say, mink control, can be a PR nightmare. We were very careful about whom we told and what people were able to see and we got away with it. My former colleagues are still carrying out the operation. Another problem we encountered is once you find a nest, how can you be certain the eggs are Canada goose and not some other goose species? Erring on the side of caution will doubtless leave target eggs untouched.

SUCCESS?

Was it a success? Partially, yes. The problem wasn't completely removed, because we always missed some nests and other geese came in from elsewhere, but Canada goose numbers were definitely reduced over time, with fewer than twenty chicks on the lake rather than the hundreds seen previously.

I think the message is that there is as usual, no simple fix for what is an extremely complex issue and the problem has to be approached from all sides.

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