



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
Division of Fish and Wildlife
and
U.S. Department of Agriculture



Dealing With Resident Canada Geese

Canada geese are a valuable natural resource that provide recreation and enjoyment to bird watchers, hunters, and the public. The sight of the distinctive V-formation of a flock of Canada geese always brings a special thrill. Their calls herald the changing seasons. But in recent years, flocks of local-nesting or “resident” geese have become year-round inhabitants of our parks, waterways, residential areas, and golf courses, where they can cause significant problems.

In suburban areas throughout Rhode Island, shoreline home development with widespread lawns on lakes and ponds, lack of natural predators, limited hunting, and supplemental feeding have created an explosion in resident goose numbers. While most people find a few geese acceptable, problems develop as local flocks grow and the droppings become excessive (a goose produces a pound of droppings per day). Problems include over-grazing of lawns, accumulations of droppings and feathers on high use areas and walkways, nutrient loading to ponds, public health concerns at beaches and drinking water supplies, aggressive behavior by nesting birds, and safety hazards near roads and airports.

This pamphlet describes the most effective methods available to discourage geese from settling on your property and to reduce problems with geese that have already become established on a site. **For more information, contact any of the agency offices listed at the end of this booklet.**

Population Growth

In 1958, the first nesting Canada goose was observed in the state. During the next several years additional nests were located. Also, the Division of Fish and Wildlife initiated an attempt to bring wild captured birds from other states to establish a resident goose flock in the Great Swamp Management Area.

By the mid 1990s, Rhode Island’s goose population had grown to more than 4,000 birds, with nesting occurring state-wide.

Legal Status

All Canada geese, including resident flocks, are protected by Federal and State laws and regulations. In Rhode Island, management responsibility for Canada geese is shared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Rhode Island DEM, Division of Fish and Wildlife. It is illegal to hunt, kill, sell, purchase, or possess migratory birds or their parts (feathers, nests, eggs, etc...) except as permitted by regulations adopted by USFWS and DEM. **Special permits are required for some of the control methods discussed in this pamphlet.**

Goose Biology

Resident geese are long-lived in suburban areas. One bird banded by the DFW in 1973 was reported harvested during the 1998 R.I. goose season. Geese begin breeding in their third spring and they typically nest every year for the remainder of their lives. Geese also pair

bond and mate for life, but if one member of a pair dies, the other will mate again. Geese lay an average of 6 eggs per nest, and more than half will hatch and become free-flying birds in the fall. **A female goose could potentially produce more than 50 young over her lifetime.**

The annual life cycle for Canada geese begins in late winter when adult pairs return to nesting areas in late February or March, as ice cover disappears. Egg laying and incubation generally extend through April, with the peak of hatching in late April or early May, depending on location in the state. Geese will aggressively defend their nests, and may attack if approached. Non-breeding geese often remain nearby in feeding flocks during the nesting season. After hatching, goose families may move considerable distances from nesting areas to brood-rearing areas, appearing at ponds bordered by lawns.

After nesting, geese undergo an annual molt, a 4-5 week flightless period when they shed and re-grow their outer wing feathers. Molting occurs between mid-June and mid-July, after which birds resume flight. During the molt, geese congregate at ponds or lakes that provide a safe place to rest adjacent to a food source. Nuisance problems often occur at this time of year because the geese concentrate on lawns next to water. Some geese without young travel hundreds of miles to favored molting areas. These "molt migrations" account for the disappearance or arrival of some local goose flocks in early June.

After the molt and through the fall, geese gradually increase the distance of their feeding flights and are more likely to be found away from water. Large resident flocks, sometimes joined by migrant geese in October, can be found feeding on golf courses, athletic fields, turf farms and commercial properties with large lawns. A daily pattern of movement from lakes, ponds or coastal wetlands to inland feed sites is established until ice or snow eliminates feeding areas and forces birds to the open waters of Narragansett Bay or south shore coastal ponds.

"Resident" geese, as their name implies, spend most of their lives in one area, although

some travel hundreds of miles to wintering areas. Resident geese are distinct from the migratory populations that breed in northern and eastern Canada. Banding studies have shown that resident geese are not simply migrant geese that stopped flying north to breed. In fact, Canada geese have a strong tendency to return to where they were born and use the same nesting and feeding sites year after year. This makes it hard to eliminate geese once they become settled in a local area.

Discouraging Geese

There are many ways to discourage Canada geese from settling in your area. No single technique is universally effective and socially acceptable. **Persistent application of a combination of methods is usually necessary and yields the best results.**

Goose problems in suburban areas are especially difficult because birds are not afraid of people and may become accustomed to scaring techniques. Also, some techniques are not compatible with desired uses of suburban properties. For example, loud noisemakers in residential areas, putting grid wires over swimming areas, or letting grass grow tall on athletic fields are not practical remedies in those situations. But don't rule out any technique that might be feasible; dogs under strict supervision can safely be used in parks and schools, and controlled hunting has been successfully used at some golf courses.

Initiate control measures as soon as you notice geese in your area, and be persistent. Once geese settle in a particular location, they will be more tolerant of disturbances and be difficult to disperse. No method works well with just a few attempts, and a comprehensive, long-term strategy is usually needed.

Control measures work in various ways. Some reduce the biological capacity of an area to support geese by reducing availability of food or habitat. Other methods disperse geese to other sites where, hopefully, they are of less concern. Some techniques reduce the actual number of geese to a level that people can tolerate ("social carrying capacity").

Control techniques described in this pamphlet include only those that have the best chance for success based on past experience. Other methods may work, and new techniques will undoubtedly be developed in the future. We welcome reports on the effectiveness of any goose control measures that you employ.

Discontinue Feeding

Although many people enjoy feeding waterfowl in parks and on private property, this often contributes to goose problems. Feeding may cause large numbers of geese to congregate in unnatural concentrations. Well-fed domestic waterfowl often act as decoys, attracting wild birds to a site. Feeding usually occurs in the most accessible areas, making a mess of heavily used lawns, walkways, roads, and parking areas

Supplemental feeding also teaches geese to be unafraid of people, making control measures less effective. Feeding may be unhealthy for the birds too, especially if bread or popcorn becomes a large part of their diet. Once feeding is discontinued, geese will disperse and revert to higher quality natural foods. Geese that depend on human handouts are also less likely to migrate when severe winter weather arrives, and are more vulnerable to disease.

Supplemental feeding should be stopped as a first step in any control program. Wild geese are very capable of finding natural foods and will survive without handouts from humans. Some success in reducing goose feeding may be achieved through simple public education, such as posting of signs. DFW can provide examples of “don’t feed the geese” signs to help implement this technique. Further reduction of feeding may require adoption and enforcement of local ordinances with penalties such as fines or “community service” (cleaning up droppings, for example) for violations.

Allow Hunting

Hunting in suburban areas is often limited by lack of open spaces and local ordinances more restrictive than state laws,

prohibiting discharge of firearms. Where feasible, however, hunting can help slow the growth of resident goose flocks. Hunting removes some birds and discourages others from returning to problem areas. It also increases the effectiveness of noisemakers, because geese will learn that loud noises may be a real threat to their survival.

Canada goose hunting is permitted statewide in Rhode Island during a special September resident goose season, when very few migratory geese from Canada are present. Hunting is allowed also during a regulated fall-winter season but regulations tend to be more restrictive to protect migratory geese that may be in the state at that time.

To hunt waterfowl, a person must have a Rhode Island State hunting license (which requires a hunter safety course), a federal Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp, a Rhode Island State Duck Stamp, and be registered in Rhode Island’s Harvest Information Program. Hunters should check local laws regarding discharge of firearms. Landowners concerned about potential conflicts can easily limit the number of hunters and times they allow hunting on their property. For more information about goose hunting regulations or setting up a controlled hunt, contact DFW.

Modify Habitat

Geese are grazing birds that prefer short, green grass or other herbaceous vegetation for feeding. Well-manicured lawns and newly seeded areas provide excellent habitat for these grazing birds.

Wherever possible, let grass or other vegetation grow to its full height (10-14") around water bodies so that it is less attractive to geese. In time, most geese will stop feeding in those areas. Instead of grass, plant or encourage native shrubs or less palatable ground cover, such as ivy, pachysandra, or junipers, around the shoreline of ponds and along walkways where geese are a problem.

You can also plant grass species that are less palatable to geese, including some that

go dormant in the winter. Geese tend to prefer Kentucky bluegrass, and are less attracted to fescue. Also, minimize use of lawn fertilizers to reduce the nutritional value of grass to the birds.

It is very difficult to eliminate goose nesting habitat. Typically, they build nests on the islands and peninsulas in wetlands. If these conditions are not present, geese will use what ever is available, however. Avoid creating islands and peninsulas and such features during landscaping of ponds in problem areas. Local zoning regulations may be a way to discourage habitat developments that favor geese.

Install Low Wires

Geese normally rest on open water or along shorelines as protection from predators. They also tend to land and take off from open water when feeding on adjacent lawns. Where practical, construct a grid-system of suspended wires over the water to deny the birds access to such areas. Single strands of #14 wire or 80-100 pound test monofilament line can be arranged with 10-15 feet between wires. Each wire must be secured so that it remains 12-18" above the water surface, and perimeter fencing may be needed to keep geese from walking under the grid. To reduce the risk of birds flying into the wires, attach brightly colored flagging or other markers to make them more visible.

Wire systems are not practical for ponds used for swimming, fishing, or other recreation. However, golf course ponds, reflecting pools, wastewater ponds, and newly seeded lawns with limited public access, may be suitable. Human disturbance (vandalism) of grid wires may be a problem in public areas.

Install Fencing

Fencing or other physical barriers can be effective where geese tend to land on water and walk up onto adjacent lawns to feed or rest. Fencing works best during the summer molt, when geese are unable to fly and must walk between feeding and resting areas. In these situations, fencing, dense shrubbery, or other physical barriers installed close to the water's

edge are effective ways to control goose movements. Fences must completely enclose the site to be effective. Fencing may also be used to block aggressive birds on nests near buildings or walkways. Although birds can get around most fencing, direct attacks may be prevented. Fencing around large open areas, such as athletic fields or ponds, has little effect on free-flying birds.

Goose control fences should be at least 30" tall (48-60" to block aggressive birds) and solidly constructed. Welded wire garden fencing (2" x 4" mesh) is durable and will last years. Less expensive plastic or nylon netting is effective, but will have to be replaced more often. Fences may be beautified or hidden by planting shrubs close by. Snow fencing or erosion control fabric may be used as a temporary barrier to molting geese. Fencing made of two parallel monofilament fish lines (20 pound test) strung 6" and 12" above ground and secured by stakes at 6' intervals can work, but is less reliable. Some success has been reported with low voltage electric fencing.

Use Visual Scaring Devices

Various materials may be used to create a visual image that geese will avoid, especially if they are not already established on a site, such as newly seeded areas. Geese are normally reluctant to linger beneath an object hovering over head. However, visual scaring devices are not likely to be effective on suburban lawns where trees or other overhead objects exist and where geese have been feeding for years.

One very effective visual deterrent for geese is Mylar tape that reflects sunlight to produce a flashing effect. When a breeze causes the tape to move, it pulsates and produces a humming sound that repels birds. This product comes in 1/2"-6"widths. To discourage geese from walking up onto lawns from water, string the tape along the water's edge. To ensure maximum reflection and noise production, leave some slack in the tape and twist the material as you string it from stake to stake.

Another visual scaring technique is the placement of flagging or balloons on poles (6' or

taller) or other objects in and around an area to be protected. Flagging can be made of 3-6' strips of 1" colored plastic tape or 2' x 2' pieces of orange construction flagging. Bird-scaring balloons, 30" diameter, with large eye-spots and helium filled, are sold at some garden or party supply stores. Numerous flags or balloons may be needed to protect each acre of open lawn. These materials should be located where they will not become entangled in tree branches or power lines. Use of owl decoys may be effective when used with other control techniques. All of these materials may be subject to theft or vandalism in areas open to the public. If geese become acclimated, frequent relocation of the materials is recommended.

For small ponds, remote control boats can be used to repel geese, and may be practical if local hobbyists are willing to help out.

Use Noisemakers

Geese may be discouraged from an area through the use of various noisemakers or pyrotechnics. Shell crackers are special shells fired from a 12-gauge shotgun that project a firecracker up to 100 yards. Other devices, such as screamer sirens, bird-bangers, and whistle bombs, are fired into the air from a hand-held starter pistol or flare pistol. These devices generally have a range of 25-30 yards.

Automatic exploders that ignite propane gas to produce loud explosions at timed intervals are effective for migrant geese in agricultural fields, but are not suitable for residential or public areas.

Noisemakers work best as preventive measures before geese establish a habit of using an area and where the birds are too confined to simply move away from the noise. At sites with a history of frequent use by geese and people, the birds may become acclimated in 1-2 weeks. Noise devices are often not effective for moving nesting geese.

Before using any of these techniques, check with local law enforcement agencies (police) about noise control ordinances, fire safety codes, or restrictions on possession and discharge of firearms. Obtain special permits

if necessary. In some areas, starter pistols are considered a handgun, and their possession and use may be regulated. Federal and state permits are not necessary to harass geese with these techniques, as long as the birds are not physically harmed.

Where discharge of firearms is allowed, occasional shooting of geese can increase the effectiveness of noisemakers, as geese associate the sound with a real threat. Special Federal and State permits are needed to shoot geese except during established hunting seasons.

Apply Repellents

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has approved the product, ReJeXiT®, as a goose repellent on lawns. Geese will avoid feeding on treated lawns because they dislike the taste. However, geese may still walk across treated areas to get to adjacent untreated areas.

The active ingredient in ReJeXiT® is methyl anthranilate (MA), which is a human-safe food flavoring derived from grapes. The material is available at some garden supply centers and costs about \$125 per acre per application. Several applications per year are usually necessary. Therefore, it is most practical and cost-effective for homeowners with only small areas of lawn to protect. For best results, follow directions on product labels; if too dilute, it won't work, if too concentrated, it can kill the grass. ReJeXiT® is not permitted for use in ponds or wetlands in Rhode Island.

Use Dogs to Chase Geese

Dogs trained to chase but not harm geese have been used effectively to disperse geese from golf courses, parks, athletic fields and corporate properties. Border collies or other breeds with herding instincts tend to work best. The dogs must be closely supervised during this activity. Except where permitted, compliance with local leash laws or park regulations is still required. Initially, chasing must be done several times per day for several weeks, after which less frequent but regular patrols will be needed.

Geese will not become acclimated to the threat of being chased by dogs.

This method is most practical where the dog and handler are on-site at all times, or where daily service (as needed) is available from private handlers. Another approach is to allow dogs to roam freely in a fenced (above ground or “invisible” dog fence) area that is not open to the public, but this may be less effective. Dogs generally should not be used when geese are nesting or unable to fly, such as during the molt or when goslings are present. Use of dogs may not be practical near busy roads or where a property is divided into many small sections by fences, buildings, or other barriers. Also, dogs can not easily repel geese from large water areas, but may be able to keep geese off shoreline lawns or beaches. Although this technique has proven effective, it is often expensive and labor intensive.

Control Goose Nesting

Geese usually return in spring to the area where they hatched or where they nested previously. Over time, this results in increasing numbers of geese in areas that once had just a few birds. Local population growth may be controlled by preventing geese from nesting successfully. Although it is difficult to eliminate nesting habitat, harassment in early spring may prevent geese from nesting on a particular site. However, they may still nest nearby where they are not subject to harassment.

If nest prevention fails, treating the eggs to prevent hatching is an option. This can be done by puncturing, shaking, or applying corn oil to all of the eggs in a nest. The female goose will continue incubating the eggs until the nesting season is over. If the nest is simply destroyed, or the eggs removed, the female may re-nest and lay new eggs.

Registration on USFWS website is required to disrupt goose eggs or nests! Please see the “Permit” section of this publication for more information regarding disturbing goose nests and eggs.

Egg treatment helps in several ways.

First, it directly reduces the number of geese that will be present on a site later in the year. Second, geese without young will be more easily repelled from a site after the nesting season. Finally, if conducted on a large enough scale (throughout a town), it can help slow the growth of a local goose population, and over time lead to stable or declining numbers. Egg treatment may be necessary for **5-10 years** before effects on goose numbers are evident.

Capture and Remove Geese

An effective method of relief for sites with problems during the summer, or to help reduce year-round goose numbers in an area, is capture and removal of geese. **Federal permits are required for this activity.**

Geese are easy to capture during the molting period (mid-June to mid-July) by simply herding them into holding pens. However, capture nets, personnel, and processing fees can be expensive. In large areas, it may be necessary to remove geese for several years to get maximum results. After geese are removed, the capture site will have substantially fewer geese for the rest of the summer or longer. Over time, geese from surrounding areas may move in if preventive measures are not in place.

Geese removed from problem areas can be processed and donated to charities for use as food. If properly handled by a licensed poultry processor, goose meat is a healthy and well-received source of food for needy people. However, this method is very controversial. Media interest, protests and legal challenges from animal rights activists can be expected.

Relocation of geese is not an option at this time. In the past, DFW captured and transported geese from problem areas to state management areas. Surrounding areas now have large enough goose flocks generating nuisance complaints. Out-of-state transfers have been virtually exhausted as resident goose flocks now occur throughout the United States and Canada. In some states, problem geese are relocated to public hunting areas to reduce the likelihood of the birds returning.

Relocation of geese is also less effective than permanent removal. Banding studies have shown that many relocated geese return to their initial capture locations by the following summer. Geese taken short distances (less than 50 miles) may return soon after they are able to fly. Adult geese are most likely to return, whereas goslings moved without parent birds will often join a local flock and remain in the release area. Birds that don't return may seek out areas similar to where they were captured, and may cause problems there too.

Many wildlife and animal health professionals are concerned that relocating problem wildlife increases the risk that diseases may be spread to wildlife or domestic stock in other areas.

Not Recommended

For almost every method that has been tried to alleviate problems caused by geese, there has been success and failure. However, some methods were not recommended in this document for various reasons. These include: use of swans (real ones create other problems; fake ones don't work); bird distress calls (effective for some bird species, but not proven for geese); scarecrows or dead goose decoys (ineffective for resident geese); use of trained birds of prey to chase geese (labor-intensive, generally not available); sterilization (very labor-intensive for surgery, no chemical contraceptives available in the foreseeable future); fountains or aerators in ponds (not effective, may even attract geese); introduction of predators (already present where habitat is suitable, but none take only geese); disease (impossible to control and protect other animals); and use of poisons (illegal).

“Community-based” Goose Management

Simply chasing geese from one place to another does not address the underlying problem of too many geese, and may simply transfer the problem from one property owner to another. This is not an effective strategy for communities with widespread goose problems. Therefore,

DFW and USDA encourage local governments and landowners to work together to implement comprehensive management programs that include a variety of techniques. Control measures will be most effective if coordinated among nearby sites in a community.

While some measures can be tried at little or no cost, others are more costly and beyond the means of some property owners. In these instances, towns may want to sponsor goose control throughout a community, similar to other animal control work. This could include posting “no feeding” areas, installing fences, spraying repellent, handling dogs, egg treatment, and removal of geese. This way, the cost of goose management would be shared by all the residents of a community, including those who benefit from the geese as well as those who may experience problems. Although Federal and State agencies can provide technical advice, we do not have the resources to provide goose control programs at the local level.

Permits

Federal permits are required to capture, handle, or kill Canada geese. Permits to kill geese are not issued unless USDA has determined that other measures were not practical or effective. Permits are issued by: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Permit Office, P.O. Box 779, Hadley, MA 01035-0779, phone (413) 253-8643. Please visit the following website: <http://www.fws.gov/permits/mbpermits/birdbasics.html>

If a permit is obtained, several conditions must be adhered to, including but not limited to the following:

- You may not use blinds, pits, or other means of concealment, decoys, duck calls, or other devices to lure or entice birds within gun range.
- To minimize lethal take of birds, you must continually apply nonlethal methods of harassment alternately with lethal control.
- Unless otherwise specified, birds, nests, or eggs taken must be (1) turned over to the USDA, (2) donated to a public educational or scientific institution, or (3) completely

destroyed by burial or incineration.

Federal permits are not required to disturb goose nests or eggs. USFWS does however require that a landowner register online at the following website:
<https://epermits.fws.gov/eRCGR/geSI.aspx>

A landowner may also chase or disperse geese from his or her property at any time without a permit as long as the birds are not physically harmed.

Plan Ahead

Property owners and communities that have experienced problems in the past can expect geese to return again unless control measures are implemented. The best time to act is in late winter, before nesting begins, or as soon as geese show up where they are not wanted. If any permits are needed, allow plenty of lead time (45-60 days) for processing.

For More Information

If the techniques described in this document are unsuccessful, or if you need more information, contact USDA-Wildlife Services or the DFW Great Swamp Field Office.

USDA can provide information by phone or by mail and will conduct site visits in special problem situations. USDA also can provide control services on site under funded cooperative agreements (for a fee). For help in Rhode Island, contact:

USDA Wildlife Services
463 West Street
Amherst, MA 01002
Phone: (413) 253-2403
Fax: (413) 253-7577

DFW can provide technical advice and information, however DFW generally does not provide field assistance to individual land owners with goose problems, but will work with local governments to help develop community-based management programs. For assistance, contact the DFW Great Swamp Field Office, 277 Great Neck Road, West Kingston, R.I. 02892, (401) 789-0281.

Two excellent reference materials developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension are recommended: *Suburban Goose Management : Searching for Balance* (28 minute video, \$19.95); and *Managing Canada Geese in Urban Environments: A Technical Guide* (42 page manual, \$10.00). The video provides a general overview of techniques and issues to help communities begin developing an effective action plan. The manual provides additional details for selecting and implementing various techniques to reduce conflicts with resident geese. To order, contact the Cornell University Media and Technology Services Resource Center, Ithaca, NY, phone (607) 255-2090.

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