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FROM THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION TO NUISANCE: HOW TO DEAL WITH CANADA GEESE ISSUES

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**FROM THE
BRINK OF EXTINCTION
TO NUISANCE:
HOW TO DEAL WITH
CANADA GEESE ISSUES**

BY JOHN ROY



LIKE JUSTIN BEIBER, CÉLINE DION AND MICHAEL BUBLÉ, the Canada Goose (aka the Canadian Honker, the Hissing Cobra Chicken, *Branta Canadensis Maxima*) is a Canadian import with many fans. However, in communities across the United States, people find these large, imposing birds (and the mess they make) a serious nuisance.

For those who reside in a region with large populations of Canada Geese, it may be a surprise to learn that the species was once close to extinction. Due to overhunting, egg collecting, and loss of food sources and habitat, their numbers began to dwindle in the early 1900s. Canada Geese were believed to be extinct until a flock was discovered in Minnesota in 1962. Since then, conservation efforts and increased urbanization creating ideal habitats have led to dramatic growth in their populations. Today, there are millions of Canada Geese throughout North America.

While humans are responsible for destroying habitats for many species, they are actually creating prime real estate for the Canada Goose. These birds prefer open areas that allow a good field of vision for spotting predators, lawns that are mowed short, and locations with a water source. This means parks, green spaces around retention ponds, sports fields, beaches,

and golf courses in urban and suburban areas have become desirable locations for Canada Geese.

Because these places are also where humans live and enjoy recreation, the presence of geese, their droppings, and the aggressive behaviors they exhibit when they feel threatened are generally unwelcome.

While Canada Geese can carry avian influenza and other viruses, and their excrement can include bacteria, the risk of disease transmission from geese to humans is low. In fact, the common injury from Canada Goose and human interaction is from the human tripping and falling while trying to run away from the fowl. Still, people prefer not to be honked or hissed at, dodge geese on the road while driving, or watch their step while strolling through the park, playing soccer, or enjoying a round of golf.

Although the issues with Canada Geese are more on the nuisance end of the problem scale, public entities may face pressure from residents to deal with them.

In dealing with Canada Geese, it helps to understand their habits. Canada Geese generally return to where they hatched or learned to fly. Once habituated, it can be challenging to drive them out. Their typical life span is 10-24 years. Each year, a nesting pair typically lays between five and seven eggs and will re-nest if their original nest is destroyed.

Because Canada Geese are especially well suited to adapt and thrive in urban environments, goose management may become necessary in nuisance situations. In controlling Canada Geese, experts often emphasize having a comprehensive plan focusing on the “3 Hs” — Hunting, Harassment and Habitat.

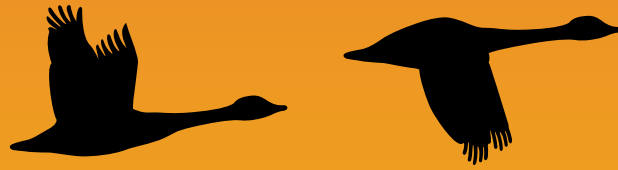
While hunting can be an effective way to reduce excess bird populations, it is often not a practical solution as state laws and local firearm ordinances may not permit hunting.

Harassment can be an effective tool in discouraging nesting when it employs multiple methods and is done before they begin breeding and building nests. Departments of Natural Resources (DNR) may provide guidance on when to employ harassment techniques.

There are many ways to harass Canada Geese, but actual physical harm should not be the end result. Geese can be harassed by spraying them with water (at low pressure) and by using scare devices such as remote-control cars and boats, whistles, air horns and alarms. Using dogs trained to chase away geese is also effective.

For best results, use a combination of harassment methods at various times of day and night over a two-week period. Variation is key as Canada Geese can become habituated relatively quickly to predictable harassment. They also have the ability to discern legitimate threats from mild annoyances. For example, they tend to lose their fear of stationary coyote or dog decoys once they realize they are not a real threat.

Another solution is habitat management in which the goal is to eliminate or make changes



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— at least to the extent possible — to the features and environments that attract geese.

Habitat management includes:

- Blocking line of sight and access to water — Both man-made and natural barriers can be effective at blocking lines of sight and access to water. Fences and dense barriers of native grasses, trees and shrubs can be used. Unmowed grass at least a foot tall and/or large rocks placed along the shoreline of ponds, lakes and golf course water hazards can make it difficult for geese to access the water.
- Eliminating easy access to food — Human feeding of the geese attracts them and keeps them in the area. Consider establishing and enforcing no feeding ordinances in public areas.

The best first step in habitat management is to contact the state’s DNR for available programs, and perhaps funding, for dealing with Canada Geese. Some DNRs offer programs to help control bird populations and habitat projects designed to discourage Canada Goose nesting.

They may also offer programs for trapping and relocating geese.

To deal with nuisance issues that come with Canada Geese, public entities should consider developing a comprehensive goose management plan that includes identifying:

1. Problem location(s)
2. Time(s) of year when the problem(s) occur
3. Available control options
4. Cost of control options

Once implemented, review the plan’s results. If it was not effective, adjust the plan and try again. Persistence is key in dealing with Canada Geese.

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