

Canada Geese Populations are Increasing

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Canada geese have been in the news lately and it hasn't been good. While experts haven't officially ruled on the cause, on January 15, 2009, the pilot of US Airways Flight 1549 told air traffic controllers his plane was hit by a double bird strike. Both engines failed, most likely from Canada geese being sucked into the engines during takeoff. The pilot made an amazing landing in the Hudson River. It was a miracle everyone survived.

Most large commercial jet engines include design features so they can shut down after "ingesting" a bird weighing four pounds. These jet engines aren't designed for Canada geese weighing 7–14 pounds. Serious situations occur when there are multiple strikes on twin engine jet aircraft because multiple aircraft systems are disabled. This is what occurred on Flight 1549.

Why Are We Seeing so Many More Canada geese?

Canada geese are native to North America, but by 1900, over-hunting and loss of habitat resulted in a serious decline of their numbers. With improved game laws, habitat recreation and preservation programs, their populations have recovered and are continuing to increase. The North American non-migratory Canada goose population increased from one million birds in 1990 to over 3.5 million in 2007.

Something else has also happened. Canada geese are not staying in rural areas, but are colonizing urban areas. Geese prefer open, nicely manicured and fertilized grassy areas near open water. The open space allows geese to see approaching



Stephen Vantassel, UNL, ICWDM.org

predators. The water provides a quick escape from predators.

If left undisturbed, Canada geese will readily establish nesting territories on ponds in residential yards, golf courses, condominium complexes, city parks or on farms. They feed entirely on readily available plants like grasses, sedges, grain and berries.

Hunting has been the primary means of managing geese populations in rural areas, but in urban areas, geese cannot be hunted (even during hunting season) because it is illegal to discharge firearms within city limits. Inside cities, there aren't many predators to keep geese populations in check.

Some migratory populations of geese are not going as far south in the winter as they used to. In Nebraska, some populations of Canada geese are staying year round, perhaps due to warmer winters.

What Problems do They Cause?

Other than the bird strike problem, there are other reasons why Canada geese are a problem.

Canada geese can be aggressive, especially when they are nesting or protecting their brood. They will charge people and pets and may bite them.

Canada geese produce large droppings. According to Stephen Vantassel, UNL wildlife project coordinator, one goose can produce up to three pounds of droppings each day. Because

geese aggregate, large quantities of droppings can accumulate in nesting and foraging areas.

Geese can do tremendous damage to lawns and landscaping by pulling up and feeding on plants.

What Can be Done?

Canada geese, like most other bird species, are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. It is illegal to harm, take or possess migratory birds, any parts of the bird, their nests or their eggs unless by special permit, granted by Game and Parks. There is a hunting season for Canada geese in Nebraska. Check with Nebraska Game and Parks for details about where and when Canada geese can be legally hunted.

No matter which methods you try, you must respond quickly and you must be persistent. Best results are achieved when you use more than one method at a time:

- **Do not feed geese.** This will encourage geese to stay.
- If you have a pond, **reduce fertilizer use on nearby vegetation.** Fertilized grasses are more nutritious than unfertilized grasses and preferred by geese.
- If you have a pond, **reduce the lawn size.** This minimizes foraging sites for geese.
- **Reduce or eliminate mowing near the pond.** Geese have more difficulty locating new shoots in taller grass (over six inches). Because they like open spaces, geese may be less likely to feel secure when grasses are tall.
- **Vegetative barriers.** Plant tall shrubs, hedges or prairie plants around the water. Plants at least 30 inches tall and 20–30 feet wide impede movement of geese to and from the water. These barrier plantings will need to be protected from geese during establishment.

- **Rock barriers.** Large boulders placed along the shoreline may discourage goose use and access to grazing sites by making it difficult for geese to get out of the water. Their effectiveness is improved when used with vegetative barriers.
- **Fence barriers.** Fences can prevent geese from walking into an area. They should be at least 30 inches tall and have openings no larger than two inches in diameter. Welded wire, chicken wire, picket fencing, plastic show fencing and construction fencing are effective.
- **Hazing.** Noisemaking devices or visual deterrents can be helpful. Disturb the birds *as soon as they arrive* to deter them from settling on the property. Predator silhouettes (effigies) may discourage geese from landing near ponds.
- **Allow legal hunting.** In rural areas, encourage hunting on your property during the legal hunting season.
- **Use a feeding deterrent/repellent,** like Turf

Shield® or ReJex-iT® AG-36. The active ingredient of these products is methyl anthranilate. It is made from natural, biodegradable, food-grade ingredients (grape extract) and is not toxic to humans, dogs, cats or birds. To be effective, it must be carefully applied so be sure you read and follow label and technical directions. It should be applied to dry and freshly mowed turf when the temperature is above 45 degrees F in full sunlight. Repeat applications may be required. In Nebraska, you don't need a license to apply pest repellents, like methyl anthranilate, but manufacturers/distributors may be unwilling to sell it to someone who isn't a certified applicator. Find out more information about these products by doing an internet search.

Wildlife experts believe Canada geese populations will continue to rise, increasing the interaction between these birds and humans. More intensive control efforts in urban areas may be needed in the future.

Canada Geese Biology Bits

- Male and female Canada geese are similar in appearance, but the male of a mated pair is usually slightly larger. When nesting, the hen will usually be sitting on the nest. The drake will fiercely guard the nest.
- Most pairs of Canada geese mate for life, but a new one will be selected if one dies.
- Canada geese usually breed the first time in their third year, but these young pairs are more likely to be unsuccessful the first time around. First timers may abandon the nest or not protect it from predators.
- As early as the first week of March, Canada geese may start nesting. Females usually nest on the bank near open waters. Their nest is a shallow depression lined with plant material and down.
- Soon after hatching, their parents take them to the safety of water. From their first day, goslings are excellent swimmers and can swim 30–40 feet underwater.
- The mustard-colored goslings eat almost continuously and grow quickly. They can weigh as much as seven pounds after only eight weeks.
- When the young are half grown, their parents molt and lose their old worn-out flight feathers. For about a month, they will be unable to fly. The parents grow new flight feathers by late summer, in time to teach the youngsters how to fly.
- In the wild, many Canada geese live longer than 10 years and some as long as 25 years.

Managing Pocket Gophers

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Pocket gophers are stocky, burrowing rodents found in Nebraska. They get their name from the "pockets," external fur-lined cheek pouches, where they carry food or bedding material to their underground nests.

These industrious animals are well-adapted to living below the ground. Pocket gophers have large incisors for gnawing on roots and powerful front shoulders and long claws for digging. Pocket gophers can excavate and transport nearly 50 wheelbarrows of soil per acre per year. You don't usually see pocket gophers above ground unless they are excavating soil to the surface as they tunnel.

Pocket gophers can be found in alfalfa fields, pastures,

rangelands, roadside areas and even backyards. They prefer to eat dandelions and legumes like alfalfa, but will also eat many kind of plants including the roots of trees, grasses, perennial bulbs and garden vegetables.

Pocket gophers maintain their extensive tunneling system throughout the year. They build most of their mounds in early spring and fall, or during periods of wetter, cooler soil conditions. Each gopher can create dozens of mounds, sometimes within a span of just a few days. So even though you may see a large number of mounds in an area, rarely are there more than eight pocket gophers per acre.

The soil mounds made by pocket gophers are fan- or bean-shaped and 8–12 inches across. There is no visible opening because the animals plug-up the mound. Pocket

gopher mounds are sometimes confused with mole damage. Mole mounds are conical shaped and 4–6 inches in diameter. It is important to know which animal you have before attempting control.

If not managed, pocket gopher activity can damage turf, crops, trees and plants. Their digging can also impact airport runways, roadbeds, dams, dikes and other earthen structures. Their mounds can dull and plug hay-harvesting equipment and leave fields rough. Pocket gophers can severely damage buried utility cables, communication lines and irrigation pipes.

Pocket gophers do have some redeeming traits. Pocket gopher burrowing does promote soil health by helping mix nutrients and organic matter through the soil. Research has shown



A single pocket gopher may exist within an extensive system of feeding tunnels and chambers.

their digging reduces water runoff, erosion and at the same time, also promotes diversity among prairie plants. Pocket gophers are food for several predators including skunks, foxes, bobcats, weasels, hawks, owls and gopher snakes (bull snakes).

Landowners can use several methods to reduce pocket gopher damage to their property. Management is most effective when a combination of methods are used. Proper timing and monitoring are



The plains pocket gopher spends almost its entire existence below ground.

essential to long-term success.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

NebGuide G1509 "Controlling Pocket Gophers in Nebraska" is available online at <http://lanaster.unl.edu/pest> or at the extension office.