

# Managing Canada Geese

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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 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 in areas where people live.

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.

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**Know how. Know now.**

## 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. Another effective hazing technique is to harass geese using low-power, long wavelength lasers. Lasers are used in low light conditions from dusk to dawn, and are directed at the ground or water close to the geese. If the geese move, the harasser moves until geese leave the area. Because geese molt and lose their flight feathers, it is important to use laser harassment after they have grown their flight feathers and can fly. One downside of using lasers is that they are relatively expensive, costing \$500-\$1000.

- **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 Nebraska's 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, baby geese 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.