

# CANADA GEESE: *Waterfowl or Just Plain Fowl?*

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**W**HAT IS happening to that truly wild bird that used to migrate thousands of miles? That bird, of which hundreds of stories have been written, has challenged generations of hunters and now challenges the golf course superintendent.

Canada geese nest in the most remote waste areas of the Hudson Bay in northern Canada. In early fall, after the young geese can fly, they begin their southern migration to places like the Delmarva Peninsula on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. They fly in large V formations at altitudes up to



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29,000 feet. With favorable winds, they can cover 1,000 miles in a few nights. The old ganders have navigated the flyway many times, and they know the safe lakes and rivers to which their ancestors have returned for 5,000 years.

The Indians thought of the Canada goose as their protection from hunger and their sentinels in the night. Their coming and going marked the passage of time, and the Indian medicine men prayed for their safe return each year. Golfers and superintendents do not have the same reverence for geese. There are still thousands of wild migrat-

*A goose roundup was used at the Country Club of North Carolina to transport the geese to another area.*



ing geese in the various flyways, but more are becoming non-migratory each year.

When a few geese arrived at The Country Club of North Carolina in Pinehurst eight years ago, members thought the wild geese were nice and started to feed them corn. Geese are prolific, and we soon had an overpopulation problem. After they nested, it was virtually impossible to get them to leave. They frequented certain areas of the golf course and left their deposits on greens, tees, and fairways every evening. The greens had to be scraped prior to mowing in the mornings.

If you have ever played golf through their excrement (droppings), or chased them off the fairway in order to make a second shot, then you realize what a problem they can be. A golf course environment has plenty of fresh water for drinking, roosting areas, verdant grasses to graze on, and no natural enemies. Once established, they are extremely difficult to drive off.

The Country Club of North Carolina has more than 100 acres of water. Eighteen of the 36 holes have water hazards, including a 30-acre lake and a 60-acre lake. Some half-hearted attempts were made to drive away a resident flock of geese, but a persistent effort was not made and the flock grew from 26 birds in 1986 to 89 birds in 1990. We had permits to shake the eggs or freeze them during nesting seasons; otherwise, we would have had 150 to 200 local birds.

By 1990 the members had had enough, and the animal damage control specialists from the U.S. Department of Agriculture were contacted. The U.S. Department of Agriculture had requests for geese in another state 700 miles away, and we cooperated and rounded up our flock in late June while they were flightless. The Department of Agriculture was paid \$1,110 for the removal of 89 nuisance geese, or \$12.47 each. The members thought this was a bargain and were happy we didn't kill

them during the special non-migratory nuisance goose season in early September. These birds have never returned.

One country club decided to shoot some of their birds during the local season, and they made headlines in the media. Some of the letters to the editors included quotes of "mindless and wanton slaughter of innocent Canada geese," "the murder of only a few geese in order to reduce soiling of their precious golf course is totally inhumane and is revolting to the sensibilities of decent people," and "the reasons given for their slaughter are self-serving rationalizations to justify a disgusting action." Even though the club dealt with the birds legally during the hunting season with the necessary permits, waterfowl stamps, and licenses, they were criticized for their actions.

**G**OLF COURSES with large lakes naturally have the greatest problem with geese, but there are numerous methods of discouraging them and

*It's Saturday morning on the golf course . . . the gang's all here!*





*Dogs can be trained to chase geese from golf course waterways.*

driving the birds away. Prevention is the best method and, like other golf course programs, it is important to be diligent.

Pyrotechnics work well if used immediately when geese try to land on lakes or ponds. An efficient system is to have someone assigned to monitor the golf course on a daily basis. There are a number of scare-away pyrotechnics such as Bird Bangers, Screamer Siren Projectiles, Bird Banger Rockers, and Shell Crackers shot from a 12-gauge shotgun. The simplest device is a single-shot pistol launcher similar to a starter's pistol. In most cases the screamers will do the job; however, if the geese refuse to leave, stalk the birds in the early morning or evening and shoot Shell Crackers or Bird Bangers over their heads. When they feel threatened for their safety, they will leave.

A few words of caution if you intend to use pyrotechnics. Check with local authorities regarding noise ordinances. If there are homes on the golf course, warn the owners of your intentions. Bird Bangers are loud, and firing one in someone's backyard at 6 a.m. will draw

some wild reactions from neighbors as well as geese. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal Damage Control, can provide names of companies dealing in pyrotechnics and useful information pertaining to goose control. To obtain the address of the Animal Damage Control office in your state, call (301) 436-8281.

Styrofoam swan families have been used successfully in keeping geese from landing on water areas of the golf course. The styrofoam swans should be placed in family groups, one per surface area. In large bodies of water, place the swan families in areas highly visible to airborne geese.

Another technique is to string a single strand of wire along the lake shoreline. This wire should be approximately six inches above the waterline. Our geese would land in the water and then swim to shore to walk out on the fairway to feed. The wire was enough of a deterrent to force them out of this area into another location of the course where we could keep better track of them.

Some golf course superintendents use dogs to chase or stalk the birds, keeping them in the water. Geese are primarily grazers and if they can't get to the turf to feed, they will go elsewhere. The dog should not be left out on the course alone. To help keep the dog's interest level high, it is important not to make it a game; treat it as seriously as a job, make it part of a daily routine, and let the dog work under your care and supervision.

The Canada goose has become a tremendous problem on golf courses, and there are no easy solutions. When using deterrents, be persistent and do not let the geese become established on your property.

In the future, repellents may be available. The USDA Bird Repellent Laboratory, in Sandusky, Ohio, is working on a repellent made from the essence of grapes. This is a food-grade powder dye which is mixed with water and sprayed along the water's edge. Only time will tell if repellents will be a successful and cost-effective method of controlling geese on golf courses.