Problem Geese

When I returned to my parents’ home in Tacoma, Washington, last summer, I decided to take Andy, my four-year-old nephew, to Point Defiance Park, where I had often played as a child. As soon as I had unbelted him from his car seat, Andy ran down the hill toward the small pond below us. Before I could lock the car, I heard him scream and looked up immediately. A large Canada goose was hissing menacingly at him, and three others were just a few feet away. I ran to rescue Andy and picked him up. That’s when I noticed that Andy’s shoes were covered with goose droppings. I then looked down. Mine were too.

After I cleaned our shoes and took Andy home, I told my mother about the incident with the geese, to which she replied, “You should have seen the park a few months ago. The geese were everywhere. Then the agents started sneaking in during early morning hours, rounding them up, and hauling them away.”

“Where did they take them?”

She smiled, “To goose heaven.”

I was stunned. I couldn’t believe that people in the environmentally conscious Puget Sound area would round up waterfowl and kill them. But at the same time, I found out from experience why the geese are a nuisance. Surely, I thought, there must be a better way to deal with problem geese. I began looking on the Internet and then went to the library to find out what other communities had done to discourage unwanted geese. I learned just how widespread the
goose problem is—from coast to coast—and how many different methods to control the geese had been tried.

The problem with the Canada geese is one that people have created. Before the 1950s, when they were hunted nearly to extinction, the geese nested in Canada and wintered in the United States. Later, conservationists found a surviving flock in Minnesota and began raising the geese to restore the population. Unfortunately, these farm-raised geese had lost their instinct to migrate and began living in the United States the year round (Schnell). Since goose hunting had been made illegal, the Canada geese found friendly habitat in the spreading suburbs, parks, and golf courses, which had plenty of grass and other food and few predators. The result was a population explosion in communities that had not seen a Canada goose in decades.

An obvious solution was to permit Canada geese to be hunted again, which several states have done. This solution works, however, only for geese that migrate. Many Canada geese now live permanently in subdivisions, urban parks, and golf courses where hunting is not allowed.

One approach to getting rid of urban and suburban resident geese has been to scare the birds. Communities have tried fireworks and guns loaded with blanks, which haven’t moved the birds for long. Other scare tactics such as flags, scarecrows, fake owls, and plastic swans—the traditional enemy of geese—have been even less successful. Canada geese are too smart to be tricked that easily. Real swans have been tried too, but they are so large and unruly that they too can become a nuisance. Plus, they fly away.

Another approach is to substitute plastic eggs for real goose eggs or to “addle” the eggs by spraying them with corn oil so that the embryos do not get enough air to develop. Plastic eggs, like plastic swans, haven’t fooled the geese, and addling eggs has not had much effect on the overall population. Still other ideas have been to spray grass with chemicals that supposedly
make it taste bad (about as successful as plastic swans) and to surround ponds with red Mylar ribbon (somewhat successful but ugly and hard to maintain).

Out of frustration communities have turned to lethal means to get rid of problem geese. In March 2001 the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved a plan to kill 4,200 geese in Puget Sound alone, and geese are being slaughtered on a large scale in other states (Lindblom). The geese are captured in the middle of summer when they are molting and cannot fly, loaded into trucks, and then asphyxiated with carbon dioxide gas.

The solution to the problem will not be found by killing the geese. They are beautiful birds that become even more breathtaking when they fly in a V formation. They also mate for life. Geese are a nuisance, not a threat. They are not dangerous to public health; no evidence has ever been produced that geese cause giardiasis or any other digestive diseases. In fact, the worst disease that geese have been accused of spreading is swimmer’s itch. Finally, killing the geese is only a short-term solution because other geese will move into the vacated habitat, thus forcing another round of slaughter. Since people created the geese problem over decades, it is unrealistic to expect a quick fix.

Other communities have resisted the easy way out. People in northern Virginia formed an organization called GeesePeace that aimed at finding nonlethal ways of dealing with problem geese. Not everything they have tried has worked, but they do continue to practice goose birth control by addling eggs. Most importantly, however, they have had considerable success training border collies to irritate geese until the geese decide to move on (Hazard). The collies, bred to herd sheep, use their herding instincts on geese. They do not harm geese, but the geese nonetheless see them as a threat. The program has been so successful that the state of Maryland rented border collies from GeesePeace to patrol its state parks (Thomson).
We too can solve our goose problem with dog patrols. Our local government might complain that border collies cost money. A registered border collie does cost about $2,000, and there are the additional costs of training, housing, and feeding the dog. But killing geese also costs money and creates a vicious cycle. Even if the dog solution is slightly more expensive than outright slaughter, the cost of dividing our community is extreme by comparison, not to mention the bad national publicity we receive. Even more important, what message are we sending to children like Andy, who is growing up in a time of violence, when we resort to killing when a problem is not easily resolved?
Works Cited


