



Living With Wildlife

Canada Geese in Massachusetts



Photo © by Bill Byrne

Perhaps no sound more clearly evokes an image of wildness than the honking of migrating geese. Canada geese have passed through Massachusetts on their journeys to and from their arctic breeding grounds for centuries. Prior to the 1930s, it was unusual for geese to nest here, yet today in Massachusetts you can find Canada geese any time of the year. In fact, in some areas, people feel that there are too many geese! Why the change?

Description: Canada geese are large birds, averaging 10-14 pounds. Among waterfowl (ducks, geese & swans) of North America, Canada geese are second only to swans in size. Their long black neck and white cheek markings are particularly distinctive.

Life History: The Canada goose is a grazer. Geese form permanent pair bonds, but if one bird dies, the other will seek a new mate in the next breeding season. Most Canada geese don't begin nesting until they are three years old. Adult females lay 4-6 eggs in a clutch. If the clutch is destroyed, geese generally don't re-nest, but with two large birds guarding a nest, the chances of success are good. Usually by the time the young are 4-6 weeks old, the broods begin gathering in large flocks. Non-breeders and yearlings form separate flocks. By fall they all gather into one large flock for the winter.

There are two different populations of Canada geese in Massachusetts. The first is the migratory population which passes through in the spring and fall. Massachusetts is one of many resting areas for these migrating birds. The second is the resident population: descendants of captive geese used by waterfowl hunters. When live decoys were outlawed in the 1930s, many captive birds were liberated. With no pattern of migration, these geese began nesting. Lawns at houses, golf courses and mowed parks, well-watered, fertilized and bordering water, provided an excellent source of food. In suburban areas, there were few predators. The habitat for grazers was perfect. In the 1960s and early '70s a "translocation" project carried out by MassWildlife involved moving birds from the coast into central and western Massachusetts to the applause of both hunters and non-hunters. No one imagined the population explosion which followed.

With the above factors and town-imposed restrictions on hunting, resident goose flocks grew. In 1983, MassWildlife biologists estimated 10-12,000 of the geese were probably year-round residents. By 1997, surveys estimated 38,000 geese statewide. As goose numbers increased, so did problems, especially with goose droppings (poop). Canada geese produce from a half pound to a pound and half of droppings per day. Now geese are on golf courses, in gardens, over shellfish beds, on lawns, beaches, water supplies and cranberry bogs. What can be done?

PREVENTING GOOSE GRIEF

Here are a few suggestions to prevent goose grief. Keep in mind that *persistence* and a *combination of tactics* will keep geese from becoming pests:

DON'T FEED GEESE — Geese (and ducks) concentrate wherever people feed them. Feeding encourages birds to stay in one place and build up flock sizes the habitat can't support. Water quality may suffer. Feeding makes geese less wary of people. It is in the birds' best interest to stop providing them with food.

SCARE TACTICS — Putting out flags, tying aluminum pie plates along strings, using scarecrows all may help keep geese away from an area until they learn these objects pose no threat. Full bodied swan or coyote decoys sometimes work because geese perceive the decoys as threats. It's important to move decoys periodically or the geese will realize the decoys aren't real. For an active approach, try walking up to the birds then flapping a tablecloth. Trained dogs are especially effective. Loud noises may also work, but geese can adapt to noise.

BARRIERS — Geese walk to their feeding sites from water, and will rarely fly over a fence, especially during the molting period (summer) when the birds are flightless. A 3-foot chicken wire fence is an effective barrier. Geese like to be able to see around them, therefore, planting a hedge or leaving a wide swatch of uncut weeds between water and mowed grass creates a natural, low maintenance barrier.

HUNTING — The problem is not the presence of geese but the number of birds. Even when geese are discouraged by the above tactics, they still move elsewhere, bringing problems to other areas. To achieve a reasonable comfort level for both geese and people, the number of geese must be reduced. Geese have been hunted for centuries and their tasty meat is prized. Timing of hunting seasons, length, number of birds that can be taken, and hunting methods are strictly regulated. Some municipal ordinances effectively prohibit hunting, inadvertently creating "sanctuaries" that allow buildup of flocks. In 1995, the Massachusetts Fisheries & Wildlife Board instituted special "early" and "late" goose seasons designed specifically to reduce only the resident goose population. Recent studies indicate that for populations to be controlled, at least 30-35% of the birds need to be harvested annually. Currently the hunting harvest is at 25%.

Creative solutions allowing for hunting geese in season include: golf clubs and race tracks inviting waterfowlers on to their grounds at designated hours; towns networking with sportsmen's clubs to find waterfowl hunters to hunt municipal properties and reservoirs within certain guidelines; and landowners opening their lands to hunters willing to abide by any restrictions the landowner may impose.

Canada geese are important and valuable birds in Massachusetts. They are classified as waterfowl species for which a regulated hunting season and management program have been established. If you are experiencing problems with geese or have any question regarding them, contact your nearest MassWildlife District Office. Further information on geese and other wildlife is also available on our website www.mass.gov/masswildlife.

January 2012



For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts

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