



05/02

Canada Geese...leave them alone please

Author: Rod Walton

Editor: Tim Miller

Canada geese (not *Canadian* – that’s bacon...) seem to be the Jekyll and Hyde of the waterfowl world, at least to humans. On the one hand, they are in the way, and they make a considerable mess. On the other hand, they are beautiful in flight, icons of Midwestern wetlands, and have many admirable qualities.



Each Spring, some of us have to face the onslaughts of some decidedly unfriendly geese (who are just protecting their mates or young, after all).

You may know from personal experience, that geese are not shy about biting or vigorously thumping you with their wings if they see you as a potential threat.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has estimated numbers of geese at Fermilab during Spring and Fall migration approach 10,000 birds. Each one of them can put away a pound or more of vegetation each day (that’s five tons a day, often of green landscaping that we worked hard to get started!)...and, what goes in, must eventually come out, resulting in the piles of “goose crud” on our sidewalks and parking lots.

Nevertheless, as a result of international agreements stretching back to 1916 and known collectively as the Migratory Bird Treaty, Canada geese are afforded a high degree of protection by the federal and state governments. These agreements invoke broad prohibitions on killing or harassing migratory birds, including Canada geese.

Permission may be obtained to control geese under certain circumstances. For instance, Fermilab recently obtained a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove a limited number of geese if they threaten the safety of the Daycare Center inhabitants (that has occasionally been an issue).

**Wild geese
do not need
to be fed by
humans!!**

These permits from Illinois and the U.S. Interior Department are very specific, and contain strict rules. One important rule is the prohibition on feeding geese. Wild geese do not need to be fed by humans! In addition to the issue of attracting geese into problematic areas, artificial feeding, especially of bread, can result in the proliferation of botulism as the bread molds, and eventually this toxin can have a harmful effect on the geese that you may think you’re “helping”.

In order for us to co-exist with geese, it’s important to keep the right perspective. The geese, like any other animal, are just trying to “make a living”, and the reason there are

so many here is due, in large part, to decisions we humans have made in developing the land from natural wetlands to manicured turf grass and widely spaced retention ponds – circumstances that the geese find nearly perfect for a stress-free life, especially since we have also eradicated most of the natural predators from the ecosystem.

Canada geese have many characteristics that we value. They tend to mate for life, and are fiercely loyal to mates and offspring. In fact, most of the aggressive behavior we see is intended to protect “hearth and home” from a perceived predator – us.

Another behavior that seems to be admirable in the abstract, but troublesome in practice is that geese tend to return year after year to the same nesting site, a behavior that



biologists call “nest site fidelity”. Fidelity of any kind seems to be a good thing, but in this case what it means is that if you had problems with nesting geese this year, the chances are excellent that you’ll encounter the same pair again next year, and for many years hereafter! Geese can be very persistent.

Although many of Fermilab’s geese are year-round residents, many do migrate through here in the Spring and Fall. Most people are fascinated, and rightly so, by birds’ abilities to navigate thousands of miles in some cases, unerringly finding foraging territories and breeding sites year after year.

Both Canada geese and humans seem to be here in northern Illinois for the long haul, and geese have not only our grudging admiration, but solid legal protection. How can we live together? Since we are rational and moral creatures (let’s just assume...) and the geese have only instinct with which to work, we have some advantages. We can learn how to cope with the geese without resorting to mass extinctions. Here are some rules of thumb:

- *Do not ever feed geese! It is definitely not necessary, and can be harmful. Feeding geese is a violation of state and federal laws.*
- *Keep in mind that geese are protected. You may not kill, injure, or harass them. Even disturbing nests or eggs is illegal without a permit.*
- *If geese “set up shop” in your path, your first action should be to find an alternate route to your car or workplace or noon-time walking path. Geese are most troublesome during mating and nesting, and this period lasts only through Spring.*
- *If you cannot avoid encountering geese, the best rule is not to turn and run! Normally, if you face them and let them know you aren’t going to move, they will back down (you do probably outweigh them by 1000%!).*
- *If you have an unavoidable problem, and you think it is a real hazard, call Roads and Grounds. But keep in mind that they cannot take or harass the geese either, and will likely caution you to learn to live with them for the short run.*