

No Geese for Dogs to Scare



Tuesday, July 24

PITTSFIELD — On a drizzly afternoon at Burbank Park, there wasn't a honk to be heard. No flapping wings, no piles of droppings, no menacing hisses directed at pedestrians who dared to get too close.

Not a single Canada goose in sight.

In fact, the major wildlife showing off yesterday had fur, not feathers, as three energetic border collies loped along the shore of Onota Lake. It was clear that the throngs of Canada geese that had overrun the park earlier in the month had moved elsewhere. For now, at least.

According to Eric Johnson, of Wild Goose Chase, a Lebanon, N.Y., company that uses trained border collies to "humanely" scare away Canada geese populations, yesterday's goose-free scene at Burbank Park was a sign of a job very well done.

"The geese can be very brazen," Johnson said. "They're very territorial."

As he stood in the rain and watched his teenage sons Sam, 19, and Caleb, 16, walk with the collies, Johnson said he was "startled" at how quickly the geese left Burbank Park. The dogs usually work an area four times a week, twice a day, until the geese get the hint.

"It took about four visits," he said. "When we worked at Richmond Pond, it took about a month to get rid of the geese."

Johnson gestured toward the quiet lake. "Last week when I came here, there were about 150 geese streaming onto shore," he said.

When he brought the dogs to Burbank Park the other day, he said, an onlooker told him the shore had been "wall-to-wall" goose droppings.

Did you know...

Along with Wild Goose Chase in Lebanon, N.Y., there are several border collie services in the United States, including:

- Honkers Away (Minnesota)
- Geese Off! (Westchester and Long Island, N.Y.)
- Goose Relief (Delaware)
- Windchazer (Virginia)

— Courtesy of www.canadageese.org

The pervasive geese — and their feces — have been blamed for the high levels of *E. coli*, a potentially harmful digestive tract bacteria found in animals and humans, that were measured in the lake water at Burbank Park. City officials closed the beach to swimming on July 5; the beach was re-opened on July 16 after the *E. coli* levels dropped.

Johnson said he heard the news on public radio about the beach closing, and he contacted the city and offered his services.

Gesturing toward the dogs — Faith, 6, Rhos, 3, and 11-month-old Tarr — Johnson noted that the collies, with their boundless, agile energy and swimming skills, were born for this kind of work.

"They're working farm dogs with a strong stalk instinct," he said. "They don't have a strong bite instinct. They won't hurt the geese."

The border collies also work very quietly, without barking, because "they don't want to scare the sheep" they were bred to herd, Johnson said.

Mayor James M. Ruberto said yesterday that Wild Goose Chase was chosen for the job because of the company's level of success, and noted that Johnson and the collies offered the most humane way of dealing with the problem.

According to Maggie Brasted, director of Urban Wildlife Conflict Resolution at the Humane Society of the United States, the city's method was indeed the fairest and most effective way of getting rid of the animals. She also said the combination of collie "harassment," along with habitat modification — the use of taller grasses in park planning, for example — were the most effective ways of getting rid of them.

Why taller grasses? Apparently, mown grass right next to a body of water — a perfect description of Burbank Park and a large portion of American landscaping — is "goose nirvana."

"If we don't do anything about what's attractive to the geese in the first place, they'll keep coming back," she said.

Another method of population control, Brasted added, included the practice of "addling" their eggs: Coating a goose egg's porous shell in corn oil, she said, ensures the egg won't hatch.

Canada geese prefer to lay their eggs on peninsulas and islands — "Water is safety to them," she said — but apparently Canada geese will make nests in the unlikeliest of places.

"There was one in a planter on the upper deck of a parking garage (in Washington)," Brasted noted. "The reality is, we can peacefully coexist with the geese. We just have to emphasize there are positive things people can do to keep them away."

Did you know...

At the end of the 19th century, hunting practices had reduced Canada goose populations to near-extinction.

In the early 1960s, small groups of Canada geese were rediscovered at a number of refuges, and federal and state agencies began a concerted effort to rebuild populations. Geese were captured and moved into new areas; eggs were taken and incubated to encourage second clutches; and in places where populations were re-established, "surplus" birds were moved to areas where geese were not yet found.

Although these efforts were probably made with good intentions, they represent one of the most dramatic examples of human action leading directly to widespread human-wildlife conflict. The principal reason for the growing conflict is that relocated geese have not learned their species' migratory pathways, and instead have remained year-round in urban and suburban areas where wide lawns, parks, golf courses and artificial ponds make perfect goose habitats.

These populations have expanded to the point where, by the mid-1980s, many states were concerned about "too many" geese.

— *Humane Society of the United States*