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Complaints mount as goose numbers boom

Once migratory birds find home sweet home in Midwest.

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Nick Graham

A flock of geese walks on the bank of the Great Miami River near Carmody Boulevard in Middletown.

By [Brian Kollars](#)

Staff Writer

The sight of giant Canada geese in the Midwest used to make people pause in admiration.

Now the federally protected bird is viewed by many as an unwelcome nuisance.

An estimated 130,000 Canada geese call Ohio home. That number has doubled in 20 years and is expected to keep increasing despite government efforts to slow the population boom.

“There’s been an increase, especially in the urban areas,” said Brett Beatty of the Ohio Division of Wildlife. “Ends up they’re fairly tolerant of people and can use a wide variety of habitat folks create. Anyplace that has water and a manicured lawn has Canada geese.”

Those cushy living conditions have attracted more geese, leading to a man-versus-bird showdown. The state has logged 2,000 online complaints about Canada geese in the past two years, and Ohioans are now conditioned to watch their step when geese are present.

“When people start to dislike wildlife, that’s a problem,” said Mike Enright of Five Rivers MetroParks. “We want to minimize the conflict between people and geese so they can appreciate that we still have them around.”

Canada geese were thought to be extinct 60 years ago. Many states responded by launching re-introduction programs. Ohio’s began in 1956 at three sites — including Mercer County — and the program proved to be wildly successful.

There are now an estimated 1.5 million Canada geese in the Mississippi Flyway, which stretches from southern Canada to Alabama. According to a 2014 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service report, “this is considered to be an over-abundant population, currently managed with the goal of reducing it.”

But geese continue to thrive. Their overall numbers have leveled off in recent years, but more geese are settling in Ohio.

Hunting helps

An adult Canada goose weighs about 12 pounds and eats 2-to-3 pounds of grass per day. That leads to more than 1 pound of droppings, which can contain E. coli bacteria. Droppings are loaded with phosphorous and nitrogen, which experts say fuel the harmful algal bloom problem that has plagued Ohio lakes in recent years.

Canada geese thrive in Ohio because of abundant water and grass, and a lack of natural predators. Those factors have caused many geese to stop migrating.

“In the wild, geese are tundra birds; they like short grass and water bodies,” Enright said. “Any geese you see in the summer are resident geese. The geese that migrate are up in Canada on the tundra, not causing problems for anyone.”

The Ohio Division of Wildlife logged 95 complaints about Canada geese in 1990. By 2008, that

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number had grown to 650. Five years later, there were 1,049 complaints.

Geese are protected by the Migratory Bird Act of 1918, but states are allowed to cull their numbers. Ohio set aside 83 days for Canada goose hunting from September 2014 to January 2015, and an estimated 80,000 of the birds have been harvested in each of the past four years.

Greg Wagner, owner of Stalk and Awe Geese Management Services, a three-year-old business with border collies that chase geese off properties, says he's busy from "sunup to sundown."

"Businesses spend a lot of money on the aesthetics of their property," Wagner said. "They (geese) destroy the grass, they leave their droppings all over the place. Come April and June, they get really aggressive toward people when the nests and goslings are around."

Joel Hanlon, grounds superintendent for the Four Bridges Country Club golf course in Liberty Twp., said the development has spent \$2,000 this year on maintenance to the grounds due to Canada geese. He said he hears a number of complaints about geese droppings on the course and the birds becoming defensive and aggressive while protecting their nests.

"It takes a couple of guys with blowers and four or five hours to blow it all off the course," Hanlon said of goose droppings and feathers.

In an attempt to keep geese away, Hanlon installed a lining around the 13 ponds on the golf course with fishing line.

"It freaks them out and they move on," Hanlon said.

Four Bridges also uses orange flashing lights at night in the ponds and green lasers that they shine on the Canada geese to scare them off. The previous superintendent kept a dog on the property.

Nick McVey, General Manager for Animal Remover, a company based out of Cincinnati, has seen an increase in 2014 and 2015 in the local population of Canada geese. He sees more Canada geese staying in the area instead of following their natural migratory paths.

The consistent population growth is "especially bad due to the weird weather we've had," McVey said, adding that more and more Canada geese are becoming resident geese, making homes where a run-in with people is almost unavoidable.

Animal Remover makes most of its visits to banks and malls to deal with Canada geese problems in the landscape, according to McVey.

Airplane strikes

Canada geese also can cause trouble in the air. A 2013 Federal Aviation Administration report chronicled 1,400 instances of Canada geese-civilian aircraft collisions from 1990-2012. Seventeen percent of those caused "major damage" and the price tag to repair the planes was estimated at \$116 million.

The most famous instance of Canada geese damaging an airplane occurred in January 2009, when a U.S. Airways jet hit a flock of the birds and was forced to land in New York's Hudson River. All 155 aboard survived.

Dayton International Airport conducts daily wildlife patrols. Airport spokeswoman Linda Hughes said field maintenance staff uses noise cannons if a flock of birds is spotted. The airport also has planted tall prairie grass and plays a "goose distress call" on speakers in an attempt to chase geese away.

MetroParks also lets the grass grow around lakes and ponds. An experimental "grow zone" along the Great Miami River downtown proved to be a success last summer.

"To (geese), tall grass equals predators," Enright said.

MetroParks uses a non-toxic chemical made from grape seed extract, which makes grass taste sour to geese. The non-toxic chemical is used at Riverscape during the warmer months and costs about \$150 to treat an acre of grass.

At Cox Arboretum, a border collie named Zip roams the property.

"To him, it's a game," Enright said. "He doesn't want to hurt them, he just wants to chase them."

Permits to destroy eggs or even shoot geese can be obtained from the Division of Wildlife. The egg program involves a little subterfuge: small holes are drilled into the eggs, which stop them from hatching, and then the eggs are put back in the nests so the geese don't lay more.

Last year, 660 such permits were issued in Ohio. This year's permits go into effect March 11.

Other permits allow for geese to be rounded up and euthanized. More than 1,500 geese were caught in 45 "roundups" statewide in 2014. They are conducted during the geese's molting season, when they can't fly.

Not everyone wants to get rid of the geese.

"It's a tough rope to walk, especially when you're dealing with so much private property," said Beatty, a supervisor for the Division of Wildlife's District 5, which covers 17 counties in southwest Ohio.

"One person loves them, the next person hates them," Beatty said. "So you've got one guy out there chasing the geese ... and the next property over, there's a person who puts out 50 pounds of corn a day to feed them."

Staff writer Ellen Hadley contributed to this report.

Canada goose complaints

In 1990, the state of Ohio received 95 nuisance complaints about giant Canada geese. That increased to 470 in 1995. In 2008, the Division of Wildlife gave citizens an online reporting option. Complaints over the past seven years:

2014 ... 941

2013 ... 1,049

2012 ... 835

2011 ... 761

2010 ... 714

2009 ... 691

2008 ... 650

Source: Ohio Division of Wildlife

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