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WS Assistance With Waterfowl

Part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the Wildlife Services (WS) program helps alleviate wildlife damage to agricultural, urban, and natural resources. WS also addresses wildlife threats to public health and safety and protects endangered and threatened species from predators.

Too Many Birds

Canada geese, ducks, and other waterfowl are valuable natural resources enjoyed by birdwatchers and the general public. In many areas of the country, nonmigrating Canada goose and duck populations are increasing dramatically. These birds require fresh water for resting and nesting and tender young grass and other succulent vegetation for food. As a result, the plentiful, well-manicured lawns of residential neighborhoods, corporate business areas, parks, airports, community gardens, and golf courses provide excellent habitat for these birds. Geese are particularly opportunistic and can easily become accustomed to people and residential areas.

Although most people find a few birds acceptable, problems quickly develop as bird numbers increase. These problems include overgrazing of grass and ornamental plants; accumulation of droppings and feathers; attacks on humans by aggressive birds; and the fouling of reservoirs, swimming areas, beaches, docks, lawns, and golf courses. Flocks of geese and other waterfowl also feed on a variety of crops, including corn, soybeans, rice, lettuce, winter wheat, barley, and rye.

Feeding of waterfowl may contribute to the problem of waterfowl conflicts with humans. In addition, migratory and nonmigratory Canada geese, like all native waterfowl in the United States, are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and State laws. Under these laws, it is illegal to hunt, kill, sell, purchase, or possess migratory birds except as permitted by regulations enforced by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Management Techniques

WS professionals recommend a number of methods to discourage waterfowl from settling in residential and crop areas. These techniques should be used in combination with one another because geese and other waterfowl quickly become accustomed to any single technique.

Canada goose

• **Discontinue feeding.** Wild geese are capable of finding their own food and will survive without handouts from people. Once feeding by humans is discontinued, waterfowl will revert back to the better quality natural foods. In most instances, the birds will leave.

• **Modify landscaping.** Geese and ducks in particular are grazers and require short, green grass for food. Allow grass to grow longer so that it is unpalatable to the birds. Along water edges, plant vegetation that is less attractive to the birds than grass, such as pachysandra, periwinkle, and euonymus. Waterfowl prefer to build their nests on islands, peninsulas, and undisturbed grounds. During landscaping, do not create small islands or peninsulas in ponds; where these features already exist, consider changes to make these areas unavailable to waterfowl.

• **Install barriers.** Waterfowl prefer to land on water and walk onto adjacent grassy areas to feed and rest. The most effective tools for controlling waterfowl movement are fences, hedgerows, and other physical barriers.

• **Use scaring devices.** Large helium-filled balloons, strobe lights, scarecrows with movable parts, bird-scaring reflecting tape, Mylar™ flags, screamer sirens, whistle bombs, shell crackers, and automatic exploders will help keep geese and other waterfowl from feeding and resting on property. Periodic movement of these items is recommended. Before using shell crackers, automatic exploders, or other pyrotechnics, check local and State regulations concerning permits and the use of firearms and pyrotechnics.

• **Utilize dogs.** Some landowners use dogs to keep geese out of hay and grain crops. Most effective are free-ranging dogs trained to chase birds as soon as they land. However, local leash laws may prevent such use of dogs.

• **Prevent nesting.** Local populations of waterfowl may be controlled if property owners prevent them from nesting. Since waterfowl are protected by State and Federal laws, a permit is required before eggs or nests can be disrupted. Permits are granted by FWS and State wildlife management agencies. Before a permit is issued, the applicant must demonstrate that nonlethal habitat-management techniques were unsuccessful in controlling damage. To obtain a permit, contact FWS.

• **Hunting can work.** Where it is safe and legal, hunting can be used to control some species of residential waterfowl. Contact your State wildlife management agency to determine local laws and regulations.

Relocation

In special instances, WS may relocate urban waterfowl using live-trapping or tranquilizers such as alpha-chloralose. However, many States discourage the relocation of waterfowl within their borders because of the possibility of problems being created elsewhere in the State. Canada geese instinctively try to return to areas where they were born and raised and should be moved at least 200 miles away from their nesting site.

Additional Information

You may obtain more information about managing waterfowl and the wildlife services of WS from any State APHIS, WS office. For the address and telephone number in your area, call the WS Operational Support Staff at (301) 734–7921. You can also find information on WS programs by visiting our Web site at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ws.

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