

We might as well learn to get along with Canada geese

By Rick Maier

'Tis the season to appreciate things, and being kind to wild but friendly animals such as geese is a great place to start.

Twenty years ago, seeing a Canadian goose was as special as spotting an eagle or an owl. Now, they're more common than Hawk or Falcon fans.

We used to admire geese for their beauty and grace, now we curse them for getting moody, and not being more discreet. We once studied their flying skill, now we spend big bucks preventing them from flying into aircraft and smashing into the windows of high-rise buildings.

We do things that attract geese, then kids throw rocks at them and drivers try to run them over. People poison them, shake their eggs and shoot them out of season.

What are we going to do – wipe them out, run them off or learn to co-exist? I think we're lucky that they still seem willing to be our friends.

Incredible animals

Before you decide, be sure to consider all of the many qualities of these creatures.

Few animals are more adaptable - they don't need shelter, deal well with heat or cold, and can hold their own flying, walking or swimming. Descending from dinosaurs has given them a hundred million or more years to develop their skills (you can even see a little brontosaurus in their profile and T. Rex in their attitude).

They look quite distinctive in their tuxedo getups, making it even more difficult to tell the guys from the gals. Their range of distinctive honks and animated body language sound menacing, but they are of little real threat to people.

Symbol of teamwork and commitment

Their flying "V" formation allows geese to travel thousands of miles, much further as a team than they could as individuals. The configuration provides lift and draft to those that follow the leaders, so they rotate positions to share the burden.

The birds in the back honk to encourage those in the front. They navigate by the stars, and pass on their routes from generation to generation.

Geese mate for life and share the responsibilities of raising their young. A goose will live alone if their mate dies. If one goose falls out of formation because he's sick or injured, two others will stay with him until he recovers or dies.

Getting along

Geese can't resist the combination of lakes and grassy fields, so it's no wonder that they love our local suburbs, golf courses and airports. When some well-intentioned humans feed them bread or corn, the geese figure the heck with those migratory urges.

Their numbers in Middle Georgia are growing rapidly, and they continue to invade new areas. Six or seven years ago a couple of geese checked out the lake in our neighborhood. Everybody got excited and started feeding them; we celebrated the arrival of several cute little goslings the next spring. At last count there were 85 geese. We no longer feed them or celebrate their additions, and the geese in turn walk around like they own the place.

The aggressive behavior of Canadian geese during mating season is a nuisance, but it's their droppings that drive us crazy. "Goose grease" doesn't do much damage other than make the grass a little greener for a few days, but it is disgusting on walkways and putting greens.

What to do

The most effective means to keep geese away would be to provide more wetlands and wilderness. The next best thing is a good herding dog. Federal and state agencies adjust the hunting regulations annually to keep local bird populations in check.

On balance, I am more than willing to put up with a few minor annoyances to keep geese around. They are wonderful animals, and we humans could learn a thing or two from them about fidelity, discipline, and teamwork.

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How many wild animals let you get this close? This gaggle is enjoying the area around Foster Lake at Wesleyan College.

Canadian geese have settled into this North Macon neighborhood.