



NEWTON
CONSERVATORS

FALL ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961

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The Canada Goose in Newton



PHOTO: PETE ROBERTS

Adult Canada Goose seen on a walk in Hammond Pond Woods

There are geese, and then there are *geese*.
Let me explain.

Back in the late 1970s when I sailed the Chesapeake Bay with friends on fall “Goosing Expeditions,” we would see huge flocks of Canada Geese, Snow Geese, and even swans migrating down the Eastern flyway in their distinctive V patterns. We would awaken at dawn after mooring in an estuary on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to the soft honking of Canada Geese — it almost sounded like dogs barking. I also recall enjoying watching flocks of birds come in for landing in the late evening — those geese would perform like acrobats with barrel rolls and wing waggles. But fall and spring were the *only* time we saw large numbers of these geese back in the 1970s.

Now there are Canada Geese everywhere there are lawns: at Crystal Lake and the Newton Cemetery, and at all the Newton playing fields and golf courses. The Canada Geese are making headlines, too. They

downed a plane in New York in 2009. They aggressively defend nests in shopping malls. They are blamed for fouling children’s playing fields and swimming holes, as well as public water supplies. *And they don’t seem to migrate anymore.*

What happened?

To begin to understand the answer, let’s explore some facts about this very large bird.

There are, according to the Cornell Ornithology Lab’s website, “At least 11 subspecies of Canada Goose ..., although only a couple are distinctive.” Here in Newton we see the most common goose, *Branta canadensis*. This is one of the largest birds you will commonly encounter with a wing span of 4 – 5.5 feet and a length of 2.5 – 3.6 feet, weighing in at 6.6 pounds on the low end to nearly 20 pounds! They compare roughly to a wild turkey but may have a longer wing span. And I’m told they are tasty, too, although I’ve never tried a wild

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goose. You'll need to buy a MA license, a Waterfowl Stamp, and a Federal Duck Stamp before you can start hunting in Massachusetts.



Adult Canada Goose with juveniles

regarding where the head of the goose is looking and hence, in which direction it will move. The breast is white or very light tan, and the back is brown. There are regional differences though. Cornell notes, "Canada Geese tend to be smaller as you move northward; plumage tends to be darker as you move westward."



A family watches geese and ducks on the Charles River in Watertown. Signs remind visitors not to feed the animals.

The Canada Goose has a black head and neck with a distinctive white "chin strap" (a patch of white running from their lower jaw over its cheek, behind its eye and nearly to the top of their head). This white patch may confuse predators

According to the Mass.gov website, "Geese form permanent pair bonds, but if one goose dies, the other will seek a new mate in the next

breeding season. Most Canada geese don't begin mating until they are three years old." When they do mate, the female Canada Goose selects the nest site, usually close to water and on a muskrat mound or other spot slightly above the water line with an unobstructed view and, according to Cornell builds a "large open cup on the ground, made of dry grasses, lichens, mosses, and other plant material, and lined with down and some body feathers." The female does all the incubation (usually 25 to 28 days). The male Canada Goose's job appears to be guarding his mate, their nest, and their fledged goslings.

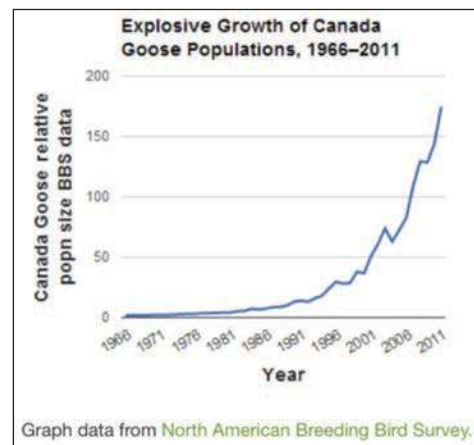
If you encounter a Canada Goose "head pumping, bill opened with tongue raised, hissing, honking, and vibrating neck feathers" you are witnessing a threat display, according to Cornell. It's best to retreat since the angry bird may attack with beak and wings.

When the birds molt in July, you may be able to find large

gray brown wing feathers (about 10-11 inches long) on the ground. Canada Geese lose all their flight feathers over a period of 4-5 weeks, and this leaves them flightless for a period in July after babies fledge and before migration.

According to Mass.gov, "...by the time the young are 4-6 weeks old, the broods begin gathering in large flocks. Non-breeders and yearlings form separate flocks. By fall, they all gather into one large flock for the winter."

But here's the problem: Massachusetts has *two different populations of Canada Geese*, one that migrates in the spring and fall and the other that stays put year-round.



PAT LEONARD, SEPTEMBER 17, 2013; [HTTPS://WWW.ALLABOUT-BIRDS.ORG/CANADA-GOOSE-RESIDENT-VS-MIGRATORY/](https://www.allabout-birds.org/canada-goose-resident-vs-migratory/)

"tollers" are calling wild geese down to be slaughtered. This method was so effective it decimated the wild Canada Goose population. Egg-collecting and development of wetlands also contributed to the decline. By the early 1900s the market for wild meat collapsed and live decoys were declared illegal — the market hunters turned their "tollers" loose. Generations of these tollers had never learned to migrate.

Hunting regulations limit the number of birds bagged. The proliferation of lawns and a 1930 government-sponsored program re-introducing resident "giant" Canada Geese for hunting has helped the Canada Goose populations to grow. Goose populations recovered nicely, and the population of resident (non-migratory) geese exploded. Cornell's North American Breeding Bird Survey of 2015 estimates there are 4.2 million to over 5.6 million Canada Geese in North America. Cornell adds that each year some "2.6 million Canada Geese are harvested by hunters in North America" without much effect on the species' numbers. Mass. gov notes, "Recent studies indicate that for populations to be controlled, at least 30-35% of the birds need to be harvested annually. Currently, the hunting harvest is about 25%." Needless to say, Canada Geese are not on the list of endangered species.

Much of our resident Canada Goose population descends from live decoys called "tollers" used by market hunters for over 200 years. The name comes from the tolling of church bells to call people to church, but in this case the



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Adult Canada Goose

Another part of the reason for the explosion of local, non-migratory geese in our suburban communities is the lack of predators. Normally skunks, raccoons, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, as well as gulls, eagles, crows, ravens, and magpies eat the eggs of wild geese. Goslings fall prey to the same predators but move to water early enough in their lives to avoid most of them. (Babies hatch with eyes open, covered in fluffy down, and leave the nest in 1 or 2 days). Our urban and suburban communities have eradicated most of these egg predators. This means a very low first-year mortality. Once a Canada Goose is full-grown, humans become its main predator, unless it is molting and cannot fly or access water to escape its larger predators like the coyote.

Wild Canada Geese are grazers in the spring, eating grass and sedges. In the fall, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, these wild geese turn to “berries and seeds, including agricultural grains, and seem especially fond of blueberries. They’re very efficient at removing kernels from dry corn cobs.” However, Cornell also notes, “Two subspecies have adapted to urban environments and graze on domesticated grasses year-round.”

It’s your grass these Canada Geese are eating. Your lawns, golf courses, parks, and playing fields are grazing fields perfectly maintained for geese, and they are virtually free of predators. Mass.gov claims that all this excellent forage causes these resident geese to “nest within a few yards of one another” because “territorial defense breaks down.” And these resident suburban birds can live twice as long as the wild birds. This results in even more geese and also far too much of that odious “poop” they leave everywhere.

A goose cannot afford to be weighed down by what it eats — it has to be able to fly immediately to escape predators. All that grass they eat? It moves through the goose in about 30 minutes and has a good amount of e.coli and other not-so-savory organisms in it. A single goose can produce between a half and a pound and a half of droppings per day.

Problem Geese

Jim Sterba, author of *Nature Wars*, titles his chapter on the Canada Goose “Lawn Carp” and describes people blaming the geese for fouling playing fields and causing eutrophication of lakes and reservoirs. (The goose droppings are rich in nutrients and combined with fertilizer run-off can cause dense plant /algae growth leading to severe shortage of oxygen and the death of animal life.)

But have goose droppings actually *caused* sickness in humans or their pets? Scott Hygnstrom at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point quotes research that transmission of disease or parasites from geese to humans has not been well documented, but the potential exists and therefore people should take precautions.

And public health officials seem to agree. Chelmsford Lake Beach was closed for two days in 2017 after public health officials performed their weekly check of the water and found high levels of single cell e. coli from goose feces.



PHOTO: B.L. BATES

People don't realize that geese stay year round unless they go out and look, shown here at the Newton Cemetery

Canada Geese can cause problems for humans in other ways as well. Aggressive geese in Ohio forced schools to postpone one track meet and relocate another when a mated pair defending their nest on the grassy area in the center of the track started attacking school officials. According to Cornell, “The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) estimates there are 240 goose-aircraft collisions each year nationwide, though some of these — like the flock that in 2009 notoriously caused U.S. Airways flight 1549 to go down in the Hudson River — can be traced to migratory birds.” <https://bit.ly/2PxrzyY>

Goose Control

There are many ways to reduce Canada Geese in public spaces. They include preventing feeding by the public,

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Adult geese graze in the grasses around the Newton cemetery.

altering the habitat to reduce its attractiveness to geese by adding barriers that affect sight lines as well as access and planting vegetation that geese don't like in place of grass. Other measures include using dogs, sound

or moving flags to scare geese away, and using chemical repellents that make the grass unattractive to eat. Finally, hampering reproduction by sterilization or by adding or oiling eggs, and rounding up and killing the geese are yet additional means of control. Only lethal means prevents the problem geese from returning or bothering another community. For an excellent set of instructions on each of the different ways to discourage geese from hanging around, see Managing Canada Geese in Urban Environments (<https://bit.ly/2C7IINV>), which you may download free from Cornell University's e-commons.

Federal laws prevent lethal means of population control without a permit. Sterba recounts several tales of local authorities gaining their local communities' support, receiving their permits, removing and killing the adult geese, and giving the harvested meat to food pantries only to later receive death threats by phone and email.

It seems there is no single solution that will please everyone in a community.

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Barbara Bates, new board member of the Newton Conservators, retired from a career in high tech, and now a part-time naturalist at Mass Audubon's Habitat Education Center & Wildlife Sanctuary



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