

Geese population worries county

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12/26/2006

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According to Cathy B. Fiddler, a Canada goose "poops about once every eight minutes."

This prolific proliferation of organic waste is one of the main reasons Fiddler's business, Geese Police of Virginia, is thriving. It is also what has some Fairfax County officials worried.

Earlier this month, the 2006 Annual Report on the Environment was issued by the county's Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC).

Part of the 266-page report outlines the impact of geese in Fairfax County, such as the "alarming level" of fecal coliform bacterial contamination in local ponds, lakes and reservoirs, even those forming part of the county's water supply.

It states that the federally protected birds, once almost exclusively migratory, "have to an increasing extent become year-round residents in Fairfax County."

"It's true," Fiddler said. "Twenty years ago, Fairfax County didn't have as many golf courses and office parks with manicured lawns and man-made ponds. Today, geese have really good grass to eat year-round; they don't have to migrate."

Fiddler, a resident of Purcellville, said many of the area geese are generational "resident" geese that were born here and have never migrated. "Over generations, some of these geese no longer even have the physical attributes, the makeup and the genetics, to be able to migrate," she said.

Fairfax County wildlife biologist Earl Hodnett, who contributed to the EQAC report, agreed. He said that for years these "resident" geese "took unfair advantage" of the federal protection offered them as migratory birds.

"That's changing somewhat now, however," he said. "The federal government has now shifted some of that responsibility onto the state level and relaxed some of the restrictions afforded Canada geese under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by recognizing and differentiating between resident Canada geese and migratory Canada geese."

According to Hodnett, actual migrating geese do not arrive in Virginia until September and leave again in early spring. "The birds here during the spring, summer and early fall aren't going anywhere," he said.

According to the EQAC report, geese waste is a well-documented source of fecal coliform bacterial contamination. Wildlife biologists estimate that the Canada geese population in Fairfax County is increasing at about 15 percent annually, "which indicates that problems associated with resident goose populations soon will increase to critical levels unless remedial actions are undertaken."



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Cathy Fiddler and Davey, of Geese Police of Virginia, patrol a pond in a Herndon apartment complex in an effort to chase Canada geese out of the water.

According to the Fairfax County Environmental Advisory Council:

Fairfax County's Canada geese population is estimated to be rising by 15 percent annually.

Geese waste is a well-documented source of fecal coliform bacterial contamination, which has reached alarming levels in many local bodies of water, including some that supply domestic water sources.

Canada geese are protected by federal migratory waterfowl laws.

Fiddler, who uses trained dogs to chase geese from localized client areas, began chasing after geese with a trained border collie in 1999 as a part-time endeavor. But with inadequate geese population control throughout the metropolitan Washington area, her business soon flourished.

She bought into the Geese Police franchise in 2001. Now she has six dogs and uses the slogan, "Call Us To Get The Flock Out!" for somewhere between \$75 and \$1,200 per week depending on location and situation.

"We do not harm the geese," she said. "As a matter of fact, we are recommended by both the Humane Society and even PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals]."

Fiddler uses the dogs to chase away the geese, hoping to impart that there are safer areas to hang out. But even Fiddler, after looking over a copy of the EQAC report, admitted that she is "just a Band-aid" on the overall problem in the county.

Hodnett, who knows Fiddler well, used the same term in reference to her services. "The root problem is an ever-growing overabundance of geese," he said.

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