

# Border Patrol Collies Defend Golf Course From Geese

■ Megan Kuhn, Deputy Editor

Cathy Fiddler gets the action started by calling out an old Scottish sheepherding phrase, "That will do." Quick as a flash, Border Collie Don leaps from his crate ready to take on the honking horde of Canada geese infesting part of the Lansdowne Resort golf course.

She commands, "come by," and Don bounds clockwise down the right side of a pond near the first hole of one of the resort's courses. The dog doesn't get very close to his prey before they start waddling away.

Don barks and glares at the geese with a wolfish gleam, which the geese interpret as

threatening. The birds increase their speed and then take to the air for safety—probably to a nearby pond by an office park—outside of the Geese Police's jurisdiction.

Mission accomplished in a couple of minutes.

Fiddler shouts to Don "come by" and he returns. After praising him for a job well done, Fiddler is ready for her next stop. Don jumps into his crate, the truck cab doors slam shut and Fiddler plugs operation stats—the time, date, number of geese removed, etc.—in an electronic time sheet. "Paper is too time consuming," she said.

An hour later, after scouting out other popular geese hangouts on Lansdowne's

golf courses, Fiddler is ready for her next assignment.

It's just another day of feathered trespasser eviction for Fiddler, who runs the 5-year-old franchise, Geese Police VA.

Business is busy, especially from February to July because of the birds' nesting season. Last year, the Purcellville resident scored 30 contracts and expects even more this year.

Fiddler's venture is now worth an estimated million dollars and she said it didn't start out as a franchise, or even a business plan. The idea to use Border Collies to chase geese off commercial and industrial properties was the result of a gift that

wasn't even given to her. The Middleburg farmhand said she became the caretaker of a Border Collie her brother bought for their father, unaware that the energetic breed makes a terrible pet, Fiddler said.

The Alexandria native taught Tippy how to play fetch and entered her in Frisbee competitions to tire her out. At a competition in 1999, she visited with another contestant who was bragging how he would teach his Border Collie to herd geese for money. Fiddler thought he was on to something, and days later she and a business partner launched Geese B. Gone. Fiddler and her partner herded geese during lunch breaks and before and after their full-time jobs.

They gained their first customer—Lowe's Island Golf Club in Sterling—after providing free geese removal service for two weeks. After contracting with Lowe's, Fiddler said it wasn't long before word spread to other property maintenance staff. Lansdowne Resort and companies and office parks in the Dulles corridor also hired the Leesburg business.

Michael Voltz, assistant superintendent for golf course maintenance at Lansdowne, said he was curious about Geese B. Gone because other geese removal methods were failing. It's always been a



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## Geese Basics:

- Geese Police uses Border Collies to round up geese because the breed does not need to retrieve or touch its prey to feel as if it has accomplished something. The breed also has a wolf-like glance called the eye, an intense stare, which geese perceive as predatory and threatening.
- Norfolk-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which does not endorse specific businesses, recommends the use of Border Collies to corral geese, said PETA wildlife biologist Stephanie Boyles.
- Canada geese are federally protected and it is illegal to touch or kill geese, eggs or nests without a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Geese defecate 28 times a day, creating two pounds of waste each day, said Bob Ellis, assistant director of the wildlife division at the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The droppings are acid based and are detrimental for the environment.
- Geese pair off and start nesting and laying eggs between February and April. The goslings hatch in mid-May. In July, geese lose their feathers and thus their flying ability for the winter.

hassle to use bird bangers, which are noise making tools, because the geese only fly away for a brief time, Voltz said, adding that his staff was tired of constantly trying to chase geese.

Gannett/USA Today contracted with Fiddler because geese were "driving us crazy with droppings everywhere. Not only on grass but on sidewalks," said John Collins, the company's director of facilities.

Now geese fly away as soon as Fiddler's truck pulls up, he said.

The initial free service in Sterling paid off. It wasn't long before demand required Geese B. Gone to hire additional staff. Then Fiddler left her day job—and steady paycheck—to manage Geese B. Gone full time.

"It was a good gamble," she said.

Even though Fiddler enjoyed being outdoors, the work was not without challenges. Fiddler and her partner lacked professional dog-training skills. As a result, their Border Collies often wandered off—usually following deer—after they'd chased away the geese. Once, Fiddler spent 45 minutes retrieving one of the dogs while nearby golfers teed off. It was "so embarrassing," she said.

Her business partner was another challenge. When Fiddler was vacationing in Hawaii, he filmed a demonstration video for a perspective client using remote controlled boats to chase geese. The perspective client declined to sign up with Geese B. Gone and bought remote controlled boats instead, Fiddler said. That was the breaking point. She bought out her partner within a year of going into business with him.

Meanwhile Fiddler's customer base

grew rapidly because the region's mild winters and increased golf course developments created disincentives for geese to migrate. At one time she was discouraged because that she wasn't sure how to run her business anymore, she said. "It's so much more than dogs chasing geese."

During a trade show she met Dave Marcks, founder and owner of the Howell, NJ-based franchisor Geese Police Inc.

Marcks took one look at her demonstration photos and informed her that she was training her dogs incorrectly. A dog trainer for 16 years, Marcks said that by looking at their posture in the photos he could tell her dogs were not working. "People think when they see me out working on the road ... 'what a great idea. I'll get a dog and a truck and I'm in business.' That's not even one-tenth of it," he said.

Fiddler told him, "Don't try to sell me a franchise." He didn't, but Marcks maintained contact with her, occasionally offering advice.

Fiddler may never have purchased a Geese Police franchise were it not for



Don, a Border Collie employed by Geese Police VA, returns to his owner, Cathy Fiddler, after herding Canada geese near the first hole of a Lansdowne Resort golf course. Don graduated from Geese Police Academy and does not touch the geese he chases. He is worth at least \$45,000, Fiddler said.

Loudoun Business/Megan Vahn

a cease and desist order she received sometime between December 2000 and January 2001. Scott's Turf Products had trademarked "B Gone" and threatened legal action against Fiddler. The fledgling entrepreneur said copyright issues had not crossed her mind until then.

"I called [Marcks], 'you set me up,'" Fiddler joked.

By May 2001 she was operating under the moniker Geese Police VA/MD. She bought two Geese Police Academy trained collies for her squad. Each dog cost at least \$45,000.

Today, Geese Police VA has five full-time employees, including Fiddler's hus-

band and business partner, Eric, and six Border Collies. Fiddler sold her Maryland franchise in 2005 and is now attempting to sell her franchise for Prince William and Alexandria counties because of the driving time it takes to service customers from those areas. The customer list has also grown to include homeowner associations, graveyards and schools—anywhere with open space, usually near water, because that is where geese gather.

The business grew by word of mouth, and Fiddler's truck, which she described as a mobile billboard with the Geese Police logo. Web address and motto: "Call us to get the flock out." ☺

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