

## Montgomery Parks Living with Wildlife

### Living with Canada Geese



*Geese standing by the water.*

Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) are one of the most common waterfowl (water birds) found in Montgomery County and in many areas of Montgomery Parks. Geese are considered waterfowl even though they spend much of their time on land. Canada geese are large birds, native to North America, and have a lifespan of 15-25 years. A long black neck and black head with conspicuous white cheek patches on either side allow for easy identification of this bird.

Canada geese are terrestrial grazers that are particularly fond of lawn areas and other short grasslands. They tend to be attracted to urban sites with short lawns located next to a body of water and will almost always choose fertilized over unfertilized grass for feeding. Geese often congregate on golf courses, playgrounds, sports fields, roadway medians, or any other well-manicured grass.

#### Natural History

Canada geese are beautiful and provide a great deal of enjoyment for many park visitors. Canada geese were originally all migratory birds that returned to the north (esp. Canada) each spring and summer to nest and raise their goslings. Their migratory flights, in a distinctive “V” shaped formation, once signified the coming change of season in the spring and fall. While some Canada geese continue migrating to and from Montgomery County, most of the Canada geese in the county are here year-round.

In the 1930’s, Canada geese were transplanted from the mid-west and stocked throughout the region. These geese were never “taught” to migrate, and because conditions in Maryland are highly favorable for these birds,

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that is, there is an abundant food supply and few predators, they never leave and their numbers have increased significantly in this area since their first introduction. They have become known as “Non-migratory” or “Resident” Canada geese.

Non-migratory Canada geese are highly productive each spring, and since they remain in the same general area year-round, they tend to have a significant impact on their surroundings. The impacts of resident Canada geese, when severe, cause systems to fall out of balance as significant conflict with people and human land uses results.

Impacts associated with non-migratory Canada geese are many, and include: feces deposits and accumulation, shoreline erosion, overgrazing, aggressive behavior, traffic hazards and economic concerns associated with all the above. The more time large groups of these birds spend in one area, the greater these impacts may be.

As a large group of geese moves through a park, golf course, athletic field or residential area they leave behind feathers, droppings, and damaged vegetation. Not only are these things unsightly, but they can also be unsafe. Substances derived from goose droppings can contain coliform bacteria as well as high levels of nitrogen. This contributes to impaired and potentially hazardous water quality. Their feces may also be a contributing factor to algal blooms and resulting toxic microcystin contamination. A simple decrease in population numbers may quickly improve these conditions. Canada geese are a wonderful part of nature and the outdoors. By educating citizens, mitigating impacts, and regulating geese populations, conflicts between birds and people can be minimized and a healthier balance can be achieved.



*Goose walking by a road.*

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### Reproduction and Nesting Behavior

Canada geese generally begin nesting at 2 – 3 years of age. Once a mate has been chosen, the birds are monogamous for life, unless their mate is lost, at which time, they will often establish a new pair bond. Beginning in late February or early March, geese return to nesting sites and lay their eggs. Nests are typically located in vegetation on land and are usually within 150 feet of a water source. However, in urban areas nest sites may vary, occurring anywhere from a patch of annual vegetation, to the base of a mature tree, to ledges and roofs of buildings.

As a female incubates the eggs, numbering anywhere between 1 and 15 (average = 5), the male keeps watch and will attack anything that comes too close. This last for 26 to 28 days, after which the eggs hatch. The adults will then sometimes move the entire brood to an area with more appropriate food accessibility and water proximity.



*Goose nesting.*

### Impact Mitigation and Population Management

Since the 1990's Montgomery Parks has been actively working to manage non-migratory Canada geese to mitigate for negative impacts. Over the years, Parks Wildlife Ecologists, Parks Maintenance staff and volunteers have used, and continue to use, a variety of strategies to address impacts resultant of concentrated populations of geese, as well as taking necessary action to directly manage resident geese populations on select parklands.

Parks has instituted a ban on feeding geese for many years, along with ongoing impact mitigation and population management practices county-wide including, but not limited to:

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- **Harassment (human and dog)**
- **Habitat manipulation**
- **Exclusionary fencing**
- **Repelling devices**
- **Egg-oiling/addling**

Montgomery Parks seeks to first utilize strategies to mitigate impacts and manage geese without the need for direct reduction. While beneficial, these strategies are not always sufficient to adequately alleviate impacts from geese. In select cases, resident Canada geese persist and pose a threat to health, public safety and/or resource management. In these cases, removal of geese sometimes becomes necessary and provides immediate relief to the most severely impacted Park areas.

Removal projects are implemented during the summer months, and only if other management practices have repeatedly fallen short to adequately mitigate associated impacts. Non-migratory (resident) Canada geese removals are implemented by way of what is commonly referred to as a “goose round-up”. This process is a humane, highly efficient means of immediately reducing localized populations of geese. Geese that are removed as part of a removal project are humanely euthanized and processed for food. The edible meat is donated through the Capital Area Food Bank for distribution throughout the greater Washington D.C. metro area.

### How you can help

#### **Do NOT feed geese or other waterfowl**

A big problem in some areas is that people attract large numbers of geese by feeding them. Feeding waterfowl only encourages the birds to stay in the area. It makes them people-dependent, and leads to overcrowding, which is unhealthy. Many people also don't realize that bread, and other human foods, are not a nutritional food source and can harm geese and other waterfowl. The first step in reducing goose numbers in an area is to stop feeding them!



*"Do Not Feed" sign*

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### Plant tall grasses, build low fences

Another way to deter Canada geese from staying in an area is by allowing tall grasses, which geese don't like to walk through, to grow up around ponds and in vacant fields. Fencing areas may also work in situations during the summer when the birds molt and cannot fly. A 3-foot poultry-wire fence can be effective around gardens and yards. Some people have found that using 20-pound monofilament line to make a 2- or 3-strand fence with strands about 6 inches apart works well also. However, with any fencing option, maintenance is important to avoid hazard of entanglement of the geese. Other exclusion practices can also be effective.

### Install visual deterrents

Visual deterrents are another option to reduce ongoing presence of resident geese. These include things like: mobile lighting features, predator decoys, reflective flashing etc. For best results, routinely changing location and positioning of devices is important.



*Goose Beacon in a pond.*

### More Information

- M-NCPPC Montgomery Parks Natural Resources Management Section Information about Canada geese on Park property: 301-962-1341
- M-NCPPC Park Police Emergencies on Montgomery County Park property: 301-949-3010
- Park Information Office General program information: [Info@MontgomeryParks.org](mailto:Info@MontgomeryParks.org) | 301-495-2595
- [Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife & Heritage \(DNR\)](#) –Information about Canada geese: 301-258-7308
- Maryland Nuisance Wildlife Information Line – Information on dealing with nuisance Canada geese or other wildlife: 1 877-463-6497

### Links to other Resources

- [Resident Geese Problems](#)  
Informational site about Canada geese and how to manage them, from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – [facts about migratory birds](#)