

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS – Canada Geese

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The Status of Canada Geese

What is the status of Canada Geese?

Canada geese have increased dramatically in abundance and geographic distribution during recent decades. Most regional surveys show that Canada goose numbers are either increasing or stable, but overall they are at unprecedented numbers. It is estimated that there are at least 7 million Canada Geese present in North America. In many parts of southern Canada, Canada geese exist in large numbers where only 30 years ago they were uncommon, and 55 years ago were considered to be extirpated. In general, all populations of Canada Geese are stable or increasing at the present time. For more information about the status of Canada Geese, please see the report Status of Migratory Game Birds in Canada at the following website:

<http://www.ec.gc.ca/rcom-mbhr/default.asp?lang=en&n=762C28AB-1>

Sometimes I hear the terms “resident geese” and “temperate-breeding Canada Geese”. What are they?

Canada Geese occur throughout North America. However, in some regions, the climate is sufficiently mild that Canada Geese are able to breed and spend the winter in the same place; these geese are sometimes referred to as “resident geese”. The term is more commonly used in the United States where large parts of the country support geese throughout the year, although there are some parts of Canada where the geese also remain through the winter. The term “temperate-breeding Canada Geese” refers loosely to Canada Geese which breed in the southern parts of Canada where the majority of Canadians live.

Why did some Canada geese stop migrating?

Canada geese return to nest where they first learned to fly. Canada geese breeding in southern Canada are not northern geese that stopped migrating, they are the result of the natural increase of populations that were re-introduced or introduced for the first time. The present-day southern landscape provides an abundance of high quality habitat for geese so they have expanded greatly in numbers and distribution. Northern-breeding geese still maintain their historic migratory behaviour nesting in Canada’s sub-arctic regions and wintering in the USA.

Are Canada geese protected and can they be hunted?

Yes, Canada Geese are protected under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994* (MBCA). This Act arose from an international treaty – the *Migratory Birds Convention* - between Canada and the United States, signed in 1916. The MBCA provides for the protection and conservation of migratory birds, and prohibits people from harming birds, except under specified conditions. Several species, including Canada geese, are considered game birds and may be hunted. The Act gives the federal government the responsibility to establish hunting seasons, and Canada Geese are greatly appreciated by migratory game bird hunters across the country. More than 500 000 Canada Geese are taken in Canada each year by hunters.

How many Canada Geese were present historically?

Canada Geese nested historically in some parts of southern Canada, particularly in open grassland areas with wetlands. These habitats in south-western Ontario and the southern Prairies supported breeding populations of Canada Geese at the time of settlement, although it is not known how many birds were present then. There is much more food and suitable habitat available now as a result of human activities on the landscape (e.g., large scale agricultural production of cereal grains), so it is likely that there were markedly fewer Canada Geese than are present today, even in areas where they occurred naturally. This landscape change also benefits the Canada Geese that nest in sub-arctic regions. Further, in other parts of the country, Canada Geese are not native and are present only as a result of intentional introductions by humans. Both introduced (southern BC, Québec, Maritime provinces) and indigenous (southern Prairie Provinces, southern Ontario) populations have grown at an extraordinary rate to the point where they are causing unacceptable damage and danger in local areas.

Why have Canada Goose populations grown so much?

The extraordinary growth of Canada Geese, like that of many species of geese, has occurred because of their adaptability to environments that have been heavily influenced by human populations. In southern Canada, Canada Geese live in mild climates with abundant wetland and grassland habitats, and few natural predators. Many gravitate to suburban and urban areas where they are not only protected from predators, but also are safe from hunting. On top of this, sources of food are more abundant and of higher nutritional value than in the past, primarily due to the expansion of agricultural activities on the land, and the adaptation by geese to foraging in these environments. This combination of factors contributes to consistently high annual production of young birds and increases their ability to survive from year to year. The unprecedented abundance of high quality food on the landscape also benefits geese that breed in northern Canada by allowing them to survive in greater numbers over winter and more easily accumulate reserves needed for egg-laying.

Are Canada Geese overabundant?

Many people have used the term “overabundant” with respect to some Canada Geese. However, to be designated as overabundant under the Migratory Birds Regulations, a species must go through a formal evaluation process. The process involves analysis of the distribution and abundance, comparison to EC-CWS objectives for the population and evaluation of any damage or danger being caused the species. The designation allows use of an additional management tool, which is to offer additional opportunities for harvest outside of the dates prescribing traditional hunting seasons. To-date, EC-CWS has not undertaken this analysis for Canada Geese although it may be required in future.

How do current populations of Canada Geese compare to the population objectives?

At the present time, Canada Geese exceed population objectives in several parts of the country.

What are Cackling Geese?

The Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) is a species of goose that looks very similar to the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*). Both species share the characteristic black head and neck with a white cheek patch, but Cackling Geese nest in the arctic and tend to be much smaller in size than are Canada Geese. Recent studies have shown that Cackling Geese overlap little with Canada Geese in size and distribution, and are genetically quite distinct, and therefore constitute a separate species.

Conflicts between geese and people

What kind of problems do the geese cause?

There are a number of ways in which geese may cause damage or danger to people. At airports, Canada Geese can be a significant safety threat to aircraft, creating dangerous takeoff and landing conditions, and most airports conduct active hazing programs to reduce this possibility. Nesting Canada geese will actively defend their nest sites, and aggressive pairs can sometimes cause injuries, especially to small children or pets. Large flocks of Canada Geese can denude grassy areas, including parks, pastures, golf courses, lawns, and other landscaped areas where the grass is kept short and where there are ponds, lakes, and other bodies of water nearby, necessitating expensive turf-management activities by landowners. Excessive goose droppings in some areas where large numbers of people and geese co-exist, e.g., at golf courses, parks, and beaches can be a concern. Agricultural and natural resource damage, including depredation of grain crops, overgrazed pastures and degraded water quality, have increased as Canada Goose populations have grown. Geese may also conflict with the objectives of conservation agencies for other species or sensitive ecosystems. This conflict occurs when geese negatively affect other species directly through aggression or more indirectly through the effects of grazing on habitats.

What is “damage”?

Damage refers to the effect of activities of the geese. Damage usually results in an economic loss to the landowner or land manager because of spoiled crops, the costs of cleaning goose droppings or the expenses of turf management. Many landowners are tolerant of the effects of small numbers of geese on their property and are willing to bear any associated small costs. However, the damage caused by any number of geese may be considered too serious by others. While most of the reported problems to date have occurred on developed, private property, increasing numbers of Canada geese are also affecting natural ecosystems in some locations. This kind of damage may have implications for conservation of other wildlife and/or sensitive ecosystems.

Do goose droppings pose a danger to human health?

EC-CWS worked with wildlife disease experts at the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre to review the diseases carried by and affecting Canada Geese, and their implications for human and animal health. There is no direct evidence that goose droppings pose a danger to human health, and the review concluded that there is not enough data to conduct a meaningful risk assessment. They found large gaps in most of the important factors which are key to determining risk; most importantly, there is virtually no information on the frequency or probability with which pathogens are transmitted from geese to people or livestock. The report is available on CCWHC’s website at: http://www.ccwhc.ca/publications_and_newsletters.php

What action does EC-CWS propose to address the conflicts?

- Inform land managers and land owners about ways they can manage their lands to be less attractive to Canada Geese (*Handbook - Canada and Cackling Geese: Management and Population Control in Southern Canada*, at: <http://www.ec.gc.ca/mbc-com/default.asp?lang=En&n=6D2B893B-1>)
- Issuance of permits under the *Migratory Birds Regulations* when circumstances warrant.
- Provide advice and information about the biology of Canada Geese and their use of habitat
- Conduct monitoring programs to verify that control efforts are undertaken in accordance with regional population objectives

- Make available Best Practices for relocating or killing Canada Geese and destroying eggs; these practices must be adhered to as a condition of a permit
- Provide additional hunting opportunities to increase the harvest of Canada Geese.

How do these actions ensure that Canada Geese are protected as required by the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994*?

The MBCA provides for the protection and conservation of migratory birds (which includes Canada Geese). However, the Act also recognizes that there are times when the damage or danger caused by birds must be addressed, and provides tools for dealing with the situations where birds come into conflict with humans. Population monitoring ensures that populations are maintained at sustainable levels.

Tools for Reducing Conflicts

I am currently suffering damage due to Canada Geese. What can I do?

First, you should read the information available in the EC Handbook at the following website:

<http://www.ec.gc.ca/mbc-com/default.asp?lang=En&n=6D2B893B-1>

The *Handbook - Canada and Cackling Geese: Management and Population Control in Southern Canada*, describes the actions that landowners can take to prevent conflicts and reduce the attractiveness of their properties to Canada Geese. It also presents the other management tools that can be helpful to address serious problems but which require a permit from EC. If the damage you are experiencing is so serious that other measures are called for, you should contact the EC Permit Officer in the region in which you live.

What management tools are available?

There are a number of management tools that are available under the authority of a Environment Canada permit to help reduce conflicts. These management tools are specified in the *Migratory Birds Regulations*:

- scare birds using a firearm or aircraft;
- destroy eggs;
- relocate birds, nests or eggs, or destroy nests for the purpose of relocating migratory birds;
- kill migratory birds at airports;
- kill migratory birds in specific circumstances.

In all cases, the birds must be causing or likely to cause damage and require a permit from EC-CWS.

What can municipal governments do to reduce conflicts with Canada geese?

In addition to reducing the attractiveness of public lands to geese and employing deterrent techniques, municipal governments can also reduce conflicts by allowing hunting wherever possible, preventing well-meaning citizens from feeding wild waterfowl, and considering geese when making future landscape planning decisions.

Who regulates the use of firearms?

Provincial regulations and/or municipal by-laws regulate where firearms may or may not be discharged. EC-CWS encourages municipalities to enable hunting, particularly where there are large populations of Canada Geese, by ensuring that prohibitions on firearm discharge are not more extensive than necessary to protect public safety, and that exemptions from firearm

discharge bylaws are available in places where it safe to do so. In addition, there are a number of provincial and federal statutes that control who may use firearms and the kinds of training that are required. The *Migratory Birds Regulations* also require that a permit be obtained when firearms are proposed for scaring or killing migratory birds causing damage or danger. It is the responsibility of the permit holder to understand the firearm discharge rules in their area.

Why can't I just do what I need to on my own property?

Canada Geese are a public resource, protected under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994*. This Act arose from an international treaty between Canada and the United States, signed in 1916. The MBCA provides for the protection and conservation of migratory birds, and prohibits people from harming these birds, except under specified conditions. However, the Act also recognizes that there are times when the damage or danger caused by birds may need to be addressed, and provides tools – available only under the authority of a permit - for dealing with the situations where birds come into conflict with humans.

Are other permits required to undertake those activities?

Depending on the location, provincial or municipal permits may be required to disturb or harm migratory birds, or to discharge a firearm. It is your responsibility to contact the provincial wildlife agency and municipal office, as appropriate, for more information about possible additional permit requirements.

How will destroying eggs help to reduce the damage?

The purpose of a permit issued allowing a landowner to destroy eggs is to temporarily alleviate problems during the summer months, by reducing the number of young flightless goslings present. If applied consistently, destroying eggs may reduce local breeding numbers over time because geese tend to return year after year to the place where they successfully raised young, and young females tend to return to the place where they were hatched. Further, when adult geese fail at hatching eggs, they will often move to different areas to join other geese and moult their flight feathers rather than remaining in the nesting area. If their eggs are destroyed every year, they may eventually give up and move somewhere else to nest.

How will relocating birds help to reduce the damage?

The purpose of a permit issued allowing a landowner to relocate birds is to temporarily alleviate problems caused by flightless moulting geese that cannot be readily scared away. It may be recommended for flocks of non-breeding adults whose breeding area is somewhere else or for family groups of local breeders. Relocating geese is not recommended in most cases since the geese may simply return to the site when they have re-gained the ability to fly or in the next season. Habitat modification is often the preferred long term solution.

How does killing birds help to scare birds away?

Scaring birds can be more effective when some members of the flock are killed. This will not significantly reduce their numbers, but encourages flying birds to use other areas and may make them easier to scare in general.

What are the alternatives to killing the birds?

There are a number of management options available to municipalities or individuals in Canada to help deal with nuisance migratory birds, such as preventing feeding by the public, habitat modification, hazing and scaring, treatment of eggs to prevent hatching, or in specified circumstances, relocation of birds to another area. Some actions listed above, may only be

done after obtaining a permit from EC-CWS. The *Handbook - Canada and Cackling Geese: Management and Population Control in Southern Canada*, describes the actions that landowners can take to prevent conflicts (<http://www.ec.gc.ca/mbc-com/default.asp?lang=En&n=6D2B893B-1>), and explain which actions require a permit. Many resources are available online to help; a quick web search using the terms "nuisance geese" brings up a number of web resources related to this problem.

Aren't non-lethal control techniques effective in reducing conflicts between Canada Geese and people?

Habitat modification and harassment tactics do not always work satisfactorily. Lethal methods are sometimes necessary to increase the effectiveness of a management program. While it is unlikely that all Canada Goose/human conflicts can be eliminated in all urban settings, implementation of a range of lethal and non-lethal management activities may greatly reduce such conflicts.

Do Airport Authorities also require permits to ensure that geese do not jeopardize air safety?

Yes, Airport Permits (MBR Section 28.(1)) are a category onto themselves within the *Migratory Birds Regulations*. Geese pose a significant risk to aircraft because of their large size and flocking behaviour. In order to reduce the risk of aircraft collisions with geese, airport owners or managers are always issued a permit upon request to allow them to use a firearm or other methods to scare or kill flying geese if necessary to ensure the safety of aircraft. They may also be issued a permit to destroy eggs or kill nesting geese on the airport property; however, habitat modification is encouraged to discourage geese from nesting at airports or using the airport for feeding or resting.

Am I eligible to receive a Damage and Danger permit?

Anyone who is a land owner or manager suffering damage or danger from geese is eligible to be considered for a permit to destroy eggs or relocate or kill migratory birds. Permits cannot be issued to individuals or wildlife control companies that are not the owners or managers of the property where the damage is occurring. The permit holder may request to designate "nominees" who will actually carry out the action on their behalf. These nominees may be individuals or wildlife control companies and they must be named on the permit. Anyone may be issued a permit to scare migratory birds (MBR, S.24) and applicants for this type of permit are not required to be landowners or managers. Holders of scare permits may designate assistants, and those assistants must be named on the permit.

I am responsible for managing a very large area of land, and I have a lot of goose problems to deal with. Do I need a separate permit for every activity I need to do?

No, every activity must be permitted, but you may request a single permit to undertake more than one activity. For large landowners undertaking multiple goose control actions, a management plan is recommended. A plan can be very helpful to streamline the permitting process and to identify efficiencies in the implementation of control measures, and does not need to be complex. The plan must clearly identify the geographic area involved, assess the nature of the problem, and provide objectives and rationale for the requested management techniques. This includes indicating where geese may use the land and where they must be excluded or otherwise managed to prevent damage or danger. A management plan is recommended for large landowners with recurring conflicts or several separate sites to manage and will normally be required if large numbers of geese are to be killed. Examples of entities for which a management plan is recommended include: Municipal governments, Conservation Authorities, golf courses, large farms, corporate campuses and cottage associations. In

particular, municipalities with airports should develop a goose management plan in conjunction with the airport authorities.

What is the advantage for me to develop a goose management plan?

EC-CWS experience has shown that management plans improve implementation efficiency by coordinating activities, improve your ability to evaluate and adapt your program for quicker results, support relations with the public, and reduce your administrative burden. A plan will also help to secure necessary budgets to conduct the management activities.

My neighbour is killing geese that nest on his property. We enjoy watching those geese every year. What can I do about this?

Permits are issued by EC-CWS to landowners who are experiencing serious goose damage on their property. Landowners are responsible for informing nearby landowners of their intended actions. Use this opportunity to inform your neighbour that you enjoy watching the geese and that you would prefer they not be killed. You could suggest alternative techniques for managing geese on his/her property and offer to help implement those management practises; the Handbook (<http://www.ec.gc.ca/mbc-com/default.asp?lang=En&n=6D2B893B-1>) entitled *Canada and Cackling Geese: Management and Population Control in Southern Canada* can help. In the end, a landowner with a valid permit has the right to manage geese on their property if those geese are causing damage. However, if you observe any person killing geese without a permit or participating in activities that you believe are in violation of the *Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994* and/or its Regulations, you should contact EC's Wildlife Enforcement Branch at 1-800-668-6767 or wildlife.enforcement@ec.gc.ca.

Why can't we eat the birds that are killed under damage and danger permits?

By not allowing birds to be eaten we help to ensure that the birds are being killed because they are causing damage, and not for the purpose of providing hunting opportunity outside of the regular hunting season.

Ensuring Conservation while Reducing Conflicts

What effect will the management tools have on Canada Geese?

Canada Geese are sufficiently abundant that even with these measures aiming to reduce the number and severity of conflicts, the populations will be sustained at healthy levels into the future. These management tools will help to alleviate local problems of damage and danger caused by Canada Geese, without reducing their numbers below the population objectives.

What assurances are there that these management actions would not harm the population?

EC-CWS conducts surveys to evaluate the status of populations of Canada Geese in many parts of the country. This ensures that management activities and issuance of permits are done in the context of conservation and long-term sustainability of Canada Geese. Furthermore, anyone who is issued a Damage and Danger Permit to destroy eggs, kill or relocate geese, must submit a report which describes the actions taken. Repeat permits will not be issued until the results of all previous permits have been reported to the regional permit issuing office and have been deemed satisfactory.

Who makes the ultimate permitting decision?

The ultimate decision rests with the Minister of the Environment or his/her designate. The *Migratory Birds Regulations* specify a number of management options available to municipalities

or individuals, which require a permit from Environment Canada. In addition to federal permits, an individual must check with his/her province to see whether it requires permits for capturing or disturbing Canada Geese. Local laws may also affect the use of other techniques, such as firearms and auditory/visual scaring devices. People or organizations intending to use these techniques must determine what their responsibilities are under municipal and provincial laws, in addition to federal permits.

Are permits to kill Canada Geese being issued in Canada?

Yes, permits to kill Canada Geese are issued to help prevent crop and other kinds of damage, and to reduce aircraft-related risks at airports.

The issue in brief

- EC-CWS's primary responsibility is the conservation of migratory birds, which includes Canada Geese
- Canada Geese have experienced extraordinary growth in abundance and expanded their geographic range
- In particular, those Canada Geese that nest, raise their young and/or moult in the most heavily populated areas of southern Canada have increased rapidly
- The population growth is caused by human-induced changes to the landscape that favour Canada Geese
- In addition, during the 1970s – 1990s wildlife agencies and individuals introduced Canada Geese to areas they had not inhabited naturally
- In parallel with the population growth, the number of serious conflicts between geese and people is growing
- The *Migratory Birds Convention* recognizes that birds may sometimes cause damage and danger, and provides management tools to reduce those conflicts (no migratory birds, their eggs or nests may be harmed without a permit)
- These tools include permits that may be issued to qualified landowners or managers to scare birds away from the problem area, destroy eggs, relocate problem birds and/or kill birds
- Application of the tools is complicated by the wide range of tolerances toward serious damage and danger caused by Canada Geese; this tolerance varies from person to person, and from place to place, depending on the particular circumstances
- Most landowners are tolerant of the effects on property caused by small numbers of geese, while at the same time the damage caused by any geese are too serious for some individuals.
- Hunting at current levels is not enough to stop the population growth and hunting regulations have been liberalized to the extent possible within the limits permitted for hunting seasons under the MBCA
- In many areas, Canada Goose populations have not reached the carrying capacity of the habitat and there is no biological reason to expect that these populations will stop growing in the short-term
- In the United States, "resident" Canada Geese have been declared overabundant and as such are currently subject to special take by hunters outside of hunting seasons
- At the present time the conservation status of Canada Geese is not threatened; populations in all regions are well above objectives; there is no conservation risk to providing permits to eligible people who need them to reduce damage and danger caused by Canada Geese on their property

- EC-CWS monitoring programs will inform management agencies when and if a change in policy and approach is needed to maintain control efforts at the appropriate level in accordance with regional population objectives