

# Life on the **goose patrol**

If it moves, a Border Collie will want to herd it. This “border patrol” is the secret behind a specialized business dedicated to scattering pesky, messy geese. BY CHRISTINA FRIEDRICHSEN



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHERRI HALL

Border Collies like Sherri Hall's Marley have herding instincts that make them ideal for scaring off nuisance geese. The dogs are trained not to attack geese, and to leave goslings alone.

## WORK IS A WILD GOOSE CHASE

for Sherri Hall every day, and she has eight trained dogs to help. Hall owns Bye Bye Birdie, a goose control company in Alliston, Ontario. It's mission is to discourage Canada Geese from hanging around public and private properties.

The Canada Goose is a national emblem, and the sights and sounds of a migrating flock swooping past in V formation are thrilling. However, geese can also be a nuisance.

Golf courses, cemeteries, municipalities, corporations and private landowners have hired Bye Bye Birdie to deal with the growing problem of Canada Geese. Hall says one goose can leave several pounds of droppings a day. Hundreds of geese flocking to a choice waterfront setting can make for a big mess, and a lot of shoveling. There may even be issues with water quality.

In addition, geese devour pasture, lawns and crops, and they are sometimes aggressive with humans. “We've had problems with office buildings where Canada Geese were attacking customers,” says Norn North, a waterfowl specialist with the Canadian Wildlife Service in London, Ontario. Although some (especially those ankle-deep in goose poop) might support a cull of Canada Geese, others would argue for humane methods of goose control. In addition, the Canada Goose, as a migratory bird, is protected under Canadian law.

Nobody's debating, however, that the goose population has exploded. In Ontario alone, flocks numbering in the low thousands during the 1950's and 1960's have grown to about 600,000 today, says North.

In the 1950's, he adds, the Canada Goose (*Branta Canadensis*) was so scarce in Ontario that the Department of Lands and Forests began to introduce them to various areas of the province. This continued until the 1970's.

Jack Miner's sanctuary for geese and ducks, established in 1904 near Kingsville, Ontario, received some development money from the provincial government. The sanctuary remains a tourist attraction, although geese are now far from rare.

In recent years, the proliferation of geese has become a problem for municipalities and owners of lakefront properties throughout Ontario and other parts of Canada, including many areas near Regina, Vancouver and more recently Montreal.

## Facts about geese

- Most Canada Geese mate for life, but a new mate will be chosen if a partner dies.
- Many Canada Geese live longer than 10 years; some will survive 25 years.
- Breeding pairs begin nesting in February and March. Peak hatching occurs in May.
- A female goose will lay two to eight eggs per year.
- Adult geese moult their wing feathers a few weeks after goslings hatch, leaving them flightless for as long as six weeks. In this vulnerable state, they are reluctant to leave the rearing/moulting area.



FILE PHOTO

RIGHT: Sherri Hall and her German Shorthair Pointer, Riley, approach a goose nest. He will keep the goose at bay while she oils the eggs for the last time. The yellow flags denote two previous oilings. Hall uses an electronic collar to prevent the dog from attacking the goose in self defense. Ganders vigorously defend the nest - *their wings have been known to break a human's arm.*



LEFT: Among Hall's employees in her expanding business is her daughter, Jennifer, on patrol with Marley.

In response, the Canadian Wildlife Service has expanded goose-hunting season: 130,000 Canada geese were shot last year in Ontario. It also relocates birds from urban areas to rural regions where hunting is permitted, and it has implemented an egg-oiling program.

The eggs are sprayed with mineral oil or safflower oil. This sterilizes them and prevents hatching.

Hall works with the Canadian Wildlife Service on the egg-oiling program, which she describes as "birth control for geese." Her sidekick is Riley, a German Shorthair Pointer trained to detect goose eggs and nests.

Every gosling that hatches on a property will come back to nest there, Hall says, adding, "We have created the perfect environment for Canada Geese. They have lost their desire to fly south."

Hall got into goose control six years ago. Her first contract was with the famous five-star Nottawasaga Inn. "I live nearby and I knew it was a growing concern," she says. "I was seeing tons of geese there."

She approached the Inn, proposing to use Border Collies for goose control, and she was hired. "A thousand geese flew in there to live for the summer. There were also flocks of 200 that would stop to take a break there."

Within four seasons of goose control, the Inn had about 40 geese in residence.

With their strong herding instinct, Border Collies are ideal for harassing geese. Instead of going after the birds to retrieve them as some breeds would do, Border Collies attempt to round them up.

Hall, who is also a veterinary technician, a professional dog trainer and breeder, says there is much more to chasing geese than meets the eye. A 45-hole golf course can be serviced with a single dog, but the job takes time.

"People think you just take a dog and go out on a golf course and chase the hell out of the geese, and that's not the case at all," she says.

"To implement a proper goose control program is a three to five year commitment."

While under contract, Hall and her dogs are on the scene two or three times a day, seven days a week from March until December. Because of this huge time commitment, a 36-hole golf course can expect to pay \$30,000 a year for full-time goose harassment, including egg oiling.

Hall also leases the dogs to golf courses for goose control purposes, and trains golf course staff. She does not sell her dogs to golf courses, but some of her competitors charge as much as \$10,000 for a trained "goosier."

Hall says her dogs effectively control geese "100 percent of the time." She and her dogs are so busy that she now has four full time employees, and is franchising her business.

## Tips for controlling geese

Lakefront areas are goose magnets. If you own waterfront property, or have a pond that is attracting unwanted geese, there are ways to make your property less inviting. The following suggestions are from Norm North, waterfowl specialist with the Canadian Wildlife Service, and Sherri Hall of Bye Bye Birdie.

- Scare away geese as soon as they arrive on your property, in February or March. Spotlights and noisemakers may help if you vary the sequences.
- Leave a buffer of tall grass, wildflowers or shrubs between your lawn and the shoreline. Geese like to be able to see what's around them. They dislike tall grass, which could hide predators such as coyotes and foxes.
- Install a low fence between the shore and your lawn. This prevents goslings, which cannot fly, from entering your property.
- If you have a pond, avoid creating islands, which are prime real estate for nesting.
- Oil eggs. You can apply for an egg oiling permit from the Canadian Wildlife Service. It will allow you to spray eggs on your property with mineral oil or safflower oil to stop embryo development and prevent eggs from hatching. (*Beware: adult Canada Geese will often attack to protect their eggs.*)
- Get a Border Collie. Dogs that are herders will help scare geese off your property.
- If you have a dog that is not a herding type, it might be more interested in retrieving birds than harassing them.
- Pond diverters will make a pond less attractive to Canada Geese. A pond diverter looks like a buoy with reflective tape dangling from its sides. The tape spins in the wind, deterring birds from landing. They cost about \$500 each, and a large pond would require two or three.
- If geese have established a nest on your property, don't destroy it. That is illegal, and the geese will doubtless build another one nearby.
- Learn more at the Canadian Wildlife Service website: <http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/wildlife/brochures/geeseshorelines-e.html>.

