(Photo By Kathy Andrews.)

Urban faunal friend or foe?

Giant Canada Geese

Story By Roy Domazlicky
Photos By Adele Hodde

Canada geese seem to be everywhere these days.

One would be hard-pressed to find a spot containing short grasses and water—parks, residential areas, golf courses, business campuses—where these stately birds aren't present. In some portions of Illinois, large populations have led to goose-human conflicts bringing about negative feelings and unfavorable media coverage.

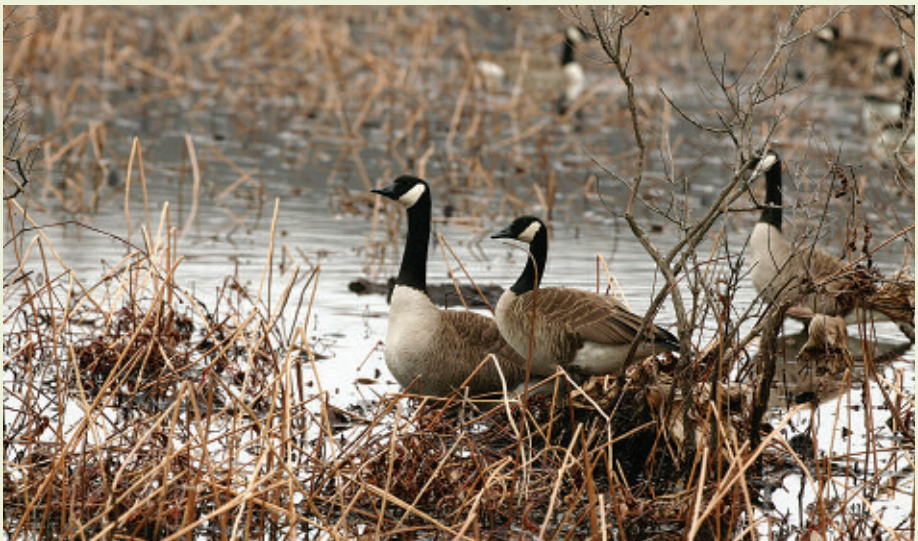
While one can sympathize with people experiencing difficulties, geese have many positive attributes that receive little attention, and a number of goose myths are unfairly propagated.

An estimated $22 million—hunting licenses, equipment, gas, food and lodging—is spent annually on goose hunting in Illinois.

One common myth about Canada geese is that birds breeding in Illinois stopped here from other places and have lost the natural instinct to migrate. While Canada geese from other areas do visit Illinois throughout the fall and winter months, the subspecies nesting in Illinois—the giant Canada goose—was present at the time of European settlement in marshes throughout most of the state.

The giant Canada goose is one of 11 commonly recognized subspecies of Canada goose. Two other commonly occurring subspecies, the interior and Richardson's Canada geese, nest in the subarctic and arctic regions of Canada, respectively. All three sub-

Canada geese are a part of Illinois' native biological landscape and their presence maintains diverse, healthy ecosystems. But in managed, short-grass areas—residential areas, parks and golf courses—geese are often considered an attractive nuisance.



species have similar markings but vary in size, with giants being the largest and Richardson's the smallest.

In the early 1900s, wetland drainage, egg collection and overharvest led to the elimination of giant Canada geese in Illinois. In the late 1960s, the predecessor to the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Conservation, began a program to reestablish the subspecies through the release of birds—first into Fulton County then to other areas—held by private game breeders. The success of these giants was facilitated by their tendency to breed at an earlier age and have a higher clutch size than northern-nesting subspecies, and their ability to adapt to artificially created habitats and tolerate human disturbance.

These strengths also brought about populations established by pioneering pairs, including the birds that now inhabit the Chicago Metro area. Giant Canada geese now nest in all 102 counties in Illinois and are abundant in many regions.

A second commonly held myth is that giant Canada geese do not migrate, launched because geese are seen year-round in many areas. These geese do not make as long or as regular of migrations as subspecies that nest in Canada, but will migrate south after a heavy snowfall buries their food source.

Another type of migration, molt migration, occurs when a large percentage of geese that are too young to breed or the nest of a mated pair is destroyed. This northward migration usually occurs in May, just prior to the feather molt. A recent analysis conducted by the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation discovered that leg and neck bands placed on geese banded over a 12-year period in northeastern Illinois were returned from birds harvested in 17 states and three Canadian provinces. This data supports the belief that while giant Canada geese are hardy and will stick around during cold weather, they do travel.

Canada geese raised in Illinois are an important component of the state's goose harvest. Biologists have banded geese for many years, and returns of bands by hunters indicate that approximately 29 percent of the Canada geese harvested in Illinois during the regular season were raised in the state.

A final myth worthy of debunking is that the population of Canada geese in Illinois is growing at an exponential rate. While some areas may be experiencing local population growth, annual helicopter surveys have shown stable statewide populations over the last several years. Spring population estimates of Chicago Metro Area geese taken between 2000 and 2002 remains stable at 30,000 individuals.

After goslings hatch, populations do rise, with further increases occurring in the fall and winter as geese arrive from the north—transient geese that leave each spring to nest in northern areas. Throughout the year, harvest, predation, disease and injury balance population gains and keep Illinois' spring population relatively stable.

No bones about it: There are a fair number of conflicts between Illinois residents and giant Canada geese. But, they also are a treasured resource. Their presence enriches our lives and helps us maintain a vital link to the natural world. In their absence, our ecosystems would be less functional and we would have far fewer consumptive and non-consumptive recreational opportunities.

So the next time you see the familiar sight of a goose grazing on a lawn or loafing in a forest preserve, take time to observe its habits and enjoy the positive contributions made by this magnificent bird.

And remember, geese enrich our lives, even if we receive a little more enrichment than we bargained for.

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