

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

TOO MANY GEESE?

By Clive E. Goodwin

As I am writing the first large flights of migrant Canada Geese are arriving. The birds first appear out over Lake Ontario, their distant clamour from over the water announcing their approach long before they come into view. As they near land they often hesitate; the neat V's and long straggling lines reduced to motley tangles, until they either turn to follow the shoreline eastwards, or re-form to continue their resolute progress northwards.

The goose flight has always been one of the surest signs that spring has finally arrived, and always eagerly awaited. It seems to coincide with temperatures becoming finally established above freezing. And it's conspicuous. Not a lonely robin hopping around someone's lawn [one that likely wintered in some sheltered area nearby], but migrants in their hundreds and thousands, heading north to their distant breeding grounds in the boreal forests and on the tundra.

But not any more. Not that the flights fail to occur – if anything, there are more birds than ever – but the magic is gone, as the spring movement has become little more than a kind of postscript to the constant comings and goings of throngs of local birds. For geese seem to be everywhere. In late February we drove around the snowy fields of Hope and Hamilton Townships, areas that on that date were still in the grip of winter with a few patches of open water here and there, patches that should have been occupied by at the most an occasional Common Merganser or goldeneye, perhaps with a few ubiquitous Mallards in more recent years. Instead there were geese, and not just a few geese, but hundreds of geese, wherever some areas of open water could be found. The climax came in Cobourg Harbour, with geese lining the west shoreline, feeding on the lawns, and swimming everywhere in small groups and large flotillas. There must have been well over a thousand, but by then we were too tired of geese to even bother trying to count them.

Historically Canada Geese were not residents of southern Ontario: indeed, Macoun, writing in 1909, doubted if they nested in Ontario at all; but by 1922 Taverner says that they breed across eastern Canada from the tree line south to 'the borders of settlement'. He also has an amusing forecast. After discussing the exceptional wariness of Canadas and their remote breeding grounds, he says "However [it] will probably decrease in proportion to the rate at which its breeding grounds are opened up". I'm not sure how he would regard our present situation!

So what happened? As usual, mankind tinkered with nature. I cannot find the precise details of this story anywhere so my rather hazy recollections will have to do. For many years the *maxima* race of Canada Goose [the 'Giant Canada Goose'], which once bred on the Great Plains, was thought to have been extirpated in the early 1900s. Then, in 1962, it was rediscovered. It was rediscovered in the strangest way, not as a few survivors

hanging on in some remote wetland, but as a common bird in one of the cities in region! It turned out that the birds were residents, so they had escaped the usual waterfowl counts that occur on wintering grounds across the continent, and resident urban birds don't usually interest waterfowl biologists, so no one had realized that they were a wholly different population.

The non-migratory trait captured the interest of a number of people, including an individual in Toronto, who felt that a resident population of geese would be an excellent focus of interest for the city. I used to meet him occasionally on duck counts, and I can recall thinking, naively, that it maybe was not a bad idea. That was probably the general sentiment, because in 1964 we had 64 newly transplanted Canada Geese on the January duck count - the first since its start in 1947. At first, very gradually, they increased; but ten years later there were 1788, and they had expanded east of Toronto, with 31 at Whitby. By 1984 just how bad an idea it really had been was clear: there were 4391, including 942 on the Whitby to Wesleyville route, which I had added in 1979 [I coordinated the effort in those days] to make the count more comprehensive.

The story now turns to Northumberland itself, as the goose juggernaut rolled inexorably eastwards. Our first large group here [excluding, of course, birds seen during migration periods] was of 600 birds at Garden Hill in December 1977. The recitation of ever-increasing numbers soon grows tiresome, but our CBC first totaled over 1000 in 1998, and by 2002 we were over 2000. Meanwhile the composite annual totals, rarely in double digits prior to 1978, have never been below 1000 since 1990, exceeded 17,000 in 2000, and reached over 27,000 in 2008, with last year's final figures not yet entered. Probably much of this would never have happened but for that fateful 64 in 1964.

I say 'probably' and 'much of this' because the numbers of goose species are now exploding everywhere, with the expanding colonies of Snow Geese, for example, destroying the tundra by overgrazing. The local Canadas do seem a mixed bunch, not the uniformly large, rather pale birds that - supposedly - characterize the *maxima* race. Perhaps some migrants have been attracted to the local hordes, and joined them to overwinter, but we would hardly have today's numbers if the introduction had never occurred.

All this expansion seems to be due to the enormous increases continent-wide in corn acreages, to the detriment of pasture and other land uses. Then, as Alan Wormington points out in a recent seasonal summary in *North American Birds*, today's 'no till' agriculture results in copious amounts of waste grain remaining on the fields over winter. So the geese, together with the local Mallard flocks, are exploiting this new source of winter food. They hardly need 'help'.

But help of a kind is exactly what they are getting locally, and because of it Cobourg harbour has become the capital for the local goose flocks. This is not to say that the harbour didn't have its share of the expanding numbers all along. Numbers increased steadily to a high of 850 in 1999, with 900 the next year, and then from 2003 to 2009 top numbers ranged between 1000 and 1100, with this high count typically in early January, except in 2006, when the peak came in early February. Our peak count last winter was

1200, not much higher, but with such numbers the totals are rough estimates at best, and the difference was that we had four other counts of at least 1000, all between the beginning of January and the middle of February, when birds began to disperse inland to nest. The birds were spending much more time in the harbour than in former years.

Last year self-appointed 'guardians' appeared who were putting out buckets-full of cracked corn in order to 'help' the birds; claiming their legitimacy, I understand, under a program of 'Wildlife Guardians' run by one of the national conservation groups. I tried to find details of this program but failed: the nearest thing seemed to be an effort to encourage persons to make their gardens bird-friendly, and indeed it's hard to imagine a national organization proposing anything so ecologically unsound as random feeding of geese, or suggesting that wild birds need humans to 'help' them to survive! But the feeding is still continuing, even though most of the geese and Mallards have now dispersed to their nesting areas. Ironically, of all the birds that occur in the County, these species are probably least in need of help of any kind.

But not everyone shares my jaundiced view of the local geese, and this localized feeding is unlikely to do much to goose numbers generally, so what's the harm if someone wants to feed them? Unfortunately, and unlike the bird feeding one might do in one's garden, or indeed the rather erratic small-scale feeding that has always occurred in the harbour, feeding on this scale can have many potentially unpleasant aspects.

For example, the droppings from such large numbers of birds, present for long periods of time, get into the waters of the harbour and pollute them. This will in time change their chemical balance, which in turn will impact on the aquatic ecosystem. The resulting conditions can make it impossible for some aquatic species to survive there, and make it more difficult for the truly wild waterfowl that occur here normally in winter to survive. The feeding is not even good for the geese themselves, as it creates a semi-domesticated population that has largely lost its fear of man, and becomes dependent on handouts to survive, exacerbating the problem already occurring on the corn fields.

In fact, this whole sorry story illustrates well the need to avoid ill-considered tampering with wildlife.