

WHEN GEESE ARE WELL FED, YOU'D BETTER DUCK

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Now that spring is truly here, it is hard not to notice some of our feathered friends settling down for a season of reproduction. Who doesn't enjoy the site of Canadian geese gracefully sailing across a lake, the cute upturned tail of a dabbling duck, or soaring seagulls circling at the beach? Sometimes experiencing these beautiful birds feels like nature at its finest. But, like anything else, too much of a good thing can cause problems.

Don't get me wrong, I love watching wildlife and waterfowl in their natural environment. But let's face it, there isn't much natural about the manicured lawns that make up our parks, golf courses and soccer fields as well as surround our stormwater detention ponds. As a result of our combined love of turf grass and water features, we have created miles and miles of landscaping that is nothing short of paradise for breeding geese. We also fill landfills with food waste and litter our beaches with the remains of our picnics, creating new opportunities for ever-expanding flocks of sea gulls.

Of course, while we like watching our feathered friends, we don't much like the end result of their feeding frenzies. Not only do they make a mess of our paths and our cars, they really do a number on our water quality. (Warning: the following might be a too much biological detail for the squeamish.)

Each Canada goose may eat 2.5 pounds of grass a day, defecating from 28 to 92 times per day, for a net result of one to three pounds of daily waste. Each bird can excrete from 0.3 to 1.4 pounds of phosphorus and one to three pounds of nitrogen per year. Twenty resident geese on a lake or pond is the equivalent of dumping a 100-pound bag of fertilizer in the water each year.

Even more alarming, goose feces can contain up to 10,000 units of fecal coliform per gram. According to studies by the USDA, potentially disease causing bacteria were present in 25 percent of goose feces sampled in a Colorado study. Closer to home, studies conducted at Illinois and Wisconsin beaches have shown pathogens in gull feces and on beaches in numbers that correlate with the number of gulls.

What can individuals do about these feathered pollution machines?

First and foremost, do not feed the fowl! No matter how cute they look or how aggressively they beg, remember that day-old bread or those leftover chips will not remain in the bird for long!

Pick up your trash! Gulls especially find garbage an attractive food source, whether on a beach or an inland parking lot.

If you have a lake or pond, don't mow straight to the water. Plant tall prairie grass or wetland vegetation around the water's edge. Geese do not like walking through tall grass, nor do they like to nest with an obstructed view. You can mow a people path to the water; just use angles and turns that people can see over, but the geese can't.

At the larger scale, control of nuisance goose and gull populations requires a long-term community commitment. For more information about regulations and community actions to control nuisance geese go to www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3000.htm.