

Grassroots group saves the geese

By DAVID GOLDSCHMIDT

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The writer is a Save the Geese organizer, as well as a freelance writer and assistant professor at The College of Saint Rose in Albany.

Three days was all it took.

Saturday morning, June 3, I arrived at Collins Park in Scotia with my wife, Kat. As the rain fell, we met up with Laura and Matt Brown, residents of Scotia. We counted almost 200 Canada geese, the very ones sentenced to death in the coming weeks at the behest of the Scotia village board, as it sought to keep the beach clean and usable for humans.

Did we know when the killings would occur? No. Would we have advance warning? No. Did the village board acknowledge our proposals to use non-lethal alternatives? No.

Was it time to take matters into our own hands? Yes.

Laura and Matt took to the waters of Collins Lake in a two-person kayak. Kat and I patrolled the shore, the ball fields. As the rain soaked through our clothes, we ran, we paddled, we shouted, we clapped our hands—all in a concerted effort to chase the geese out of Collins Park. And the geese took flight. We had hope.

At noon, we joined the weekly rally at the intersection of Route 5 and Schonowee Avenue. Even as the rain fell, dozens of activists held signs protesting the kill plan. Passersby honked their horns in support of saving the geese. We spread the word that we were chasing the geese away. A volunteer list formed, growing to over 30 members within days.

For the remainder of the weekend and Monday, joined by additional volunteers with kayaks and border collies, we chased the geese out of Collins Park. As the sun set Monday night, we counted 18 geese, a number that quickly diminished to zero.

And three days was all it took.

Goose people unite

Knowing that some of the geese of Collins Park were non-migratory resident birds, our volunteers took to the Mohawk River, scattering the birds as far up and down the river as possible. Frantic e-mails and phone calls of geese sightings rallied our volunteers to return to the waters day after day.

Less than a month earlier, on May 10, after a newsworthy village board meeting in Scotia, our group, Save the Geese, formed. By Friday, May 12, we launched a Web site (<http://savethegeese.webhop.net>), followed by an e-mail list of over 80 participants. Phone trees and media contacts grew, and we garnered support from animal-welfare groups across the nation. We were on the map, making waves, taking action, signing petitions, calling and writing letters to village officials, elected government representatives, state officials including the DEC, and federal representatives including the USDA.

Our message? Please put a stop to this unnecessary killing. After all, what sense did the kill plan make? Kill the geese today, more return tomorrow.

Guilty until proven innocent

We repeatedly heard accusations that Collins Lake was contaminated and closed last season because of the geese and the hazards they pose to human health. The Schenectady County Health Department and village officials all agreed coliform levels were too high in the lake, but stated the cause was unknown, attributable to any number of factors.

Why blame the geese?

A joint study conducted by University of Maryland's Department of Microbiology and John Hopkins' Department of Pathology concluded Canada geese "do not harbor detectable, enteric pathogens as a component of their natural flora." A separate study performed by the National Wildlife Health Center determined the "risk of humans [contracting] disease through contact with Canada goose feces appears to be minimal."

At the June 14 village board meeting, Ward Stone, wildlife pathologist for the state for the last four decades, reiterated these conclusions. Stone emphatically

advised Scotia Mayor Michael McLaughlin and village trustees that geese carry nothing harmful to humans. Even Scotia parks director, Jim Marx, concurred, stating in an article published last year, “there is no known pathogen that a Canada goose can pass to a human.”

In a Gazette article by Mary Martialay published on July 15, both Marx and the Schenectady County Health Department remain stumped. Goose-free since June 5, Collins Lake still has exceedingly high coliform levels, even with multiple applications of herbicides and an extensive aeration system.

Fear and molting

In mid-June, the geese began to molt, losing their feathers in an annual ritual of nature. They were now vulnerable. Though Collins Lake was goose-free, clusters of flightless geese floated along the Mohawk River. Could the USDA round the geese up on the river? We had no clear answers, so our efforts to chase geese continued.

On June 26, days before Scotia’s scheduled Fourth of July event, the USDA and DEC trucks arrived. Was it a roundup? The lake was empty, but not the river. Panic! Should we notify the media? Volunteers redoubled their efforts to chase geese away, but truck sightings continued.

On June 28, we heard reports that the USDA was probably not going to kill any geese. We rejoiced, but McLaughlin remained silent on the issue. Then the floods came. The destruction was awful and all attention turned to the people and families in need of assistance. When the waters receded, our fears intact, we continued to chase geese up and down the Mohawk River.

On July 11, McLaughlin released a statement accepting the USDA’s decision to not kill the geese. Our group gave a collective sigh of relief. We had won! We stopped the unnecessary killing of close to 200 Canada geese in Collins Park.

But we knew our job was not yet over.

Plans for a non-lethal future

We are still dedicated to chasing Canada geese out of Collins Park and the surrounding areas. The village planned to leave 30 survivors in Collins Lake, so our goal is to chase geese away when their numbers grow beyond 30. To be effective in the long term, our chasing techniques must be integrated into a comprehensive non-lethal Canada goose population management program.

With ongoing volunteer support from Save the Geese, the village of Scotia has the opportunity to humanely keep Collins Park clean using only non-lethal methods. We urge the village to adopt a plan to use non-lethal hazing techniques prescribed by the USDA and GeesePeace (a national advocacy group), create natural hazards and barriers (e.g. plant vegetation that geese do not like, spray grape extract to make grass unappetizing to geese), continue to "addle" eggs so that they will not hatch, and use birth control feed from Innolytics and other organizations.

We invite the village of Scotia to meet with us to develop a comprehensive non-lethal plan. As is evident by our efforts, volunteers are willing to take action and remain both steadfast and dedicated until desired goals are met. Long-term plans will ensure the cleanliness of the park is maintained and the lives of the geese are not in danger.

By accepting the help of the Save the Geese group, the village of Scotia has an opportunity to show leadership and humanity, serving as an example to other communities facing conflicts between humans and wildlife.

We teach our children that killing is not a solution, but some seem to forget the lesson. Let the lesson be clear. Killing is not the answer.

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Save the Geese is a grassroots advocacy group dedicated to saving Canada geese from unnecessary slaughter. Save the Geese advocates for the use of humane non-lethal methods to manage Canada goose populations throughout New York state. To help ensure the safety of Canada geese in Scotia, visit <http://savethegeese.webhop.net> or e-mail savethegeese@gmail.com.