

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

Geese cooking your goose? Expert has the cure

Thursday, May 12, 2005

JOE BLUNDO

How many college professors does it take to shoo a flock of geese?

One, if the professor is "Dr. Goose," also known as Philip Whitford of Capital University.

Whitford, 54, is the brain behind the battles waged against the giant Canada goose at golf courses, corporate parks, shopping centers and anywhere else the winged pooping machine decides to live.

His Buick bears "Dr. Goose" license plates, and his head is filled with goose statistics: One produces 1.5 pounds of droppings daily, goes on alert when a passer-by is 7.6 yards away and can use its wings to deliver a 50-mph blow.

"I've seen a full-grown deer get beaten so badly that it ran off with a goose still attached."

Whitford says this with a hint of admiration. He has loved geese since he was a child in Wisconsin. His doctoral thesis was titled "Vocal and Visual Communication and Other Social Behavior in Canada Geese."

His research once led him to play dad to a brood of goslings he hatched in his home. His wife, Karen, was mom. For 16 weeks, every time they sat down, they had baby geese crowding onto their laps. The geese hopped off only when nature called.

"We kept the house pretty well covered with newspapers," said Whitford, whose wife died in 2000.

His academic interest in geese coincided with their comeback. The giant Canada goose had all but disappeared in the 1960s when conservationists began a program to reintroduce it to prairies in the United States and Canada, Whitford said.

The plan worked too well. The birds began to multiply and discovered goose heaven in the suburbs. Geese favor short, well-fertilized grass for food. They prefer to be near ponds for escape from predators. They love warm asphalt on a cold day. It's as if Westerville or New Albany were designed for them.

People think they're cute until their numbers grow, their droppings pile up and they become aggressive defending their nests.

Then they call Whitford.

On a recent morning, he accompanied Dirk Shearer of the Wildlife Control Co. to the home of Inez Paglieri in goose-infested Dublin. She sought professional help after the two geese that had taken up residence near her pond grew to a flock of 30.

It's illegal to kill troublesome geese without state permission, so Whitford counsels making them uncomfortable. The approach takes persistence and surprise: If you show up at the same time every day, the geese will learn to leave — then return when you've gone.



FRED SQUILLANTE | DISPATCH

Philip Whitford, aka "Dr. Goose"
— the one to call for assistance

In the battle against Paglieri's geese, Shearer has used a border collie named Ted, a starter pistol that fires loud pyrotechnics (think fireworks without the pretty colors); a remote-controlled boat to scatter geese in the water; and the GooseBuster.

The GooseBuster, produced by a company called Bird-X and based on Whitford's research and recordings, is an \$800 sound system that mimics goose alarm calls. It was instrumental in ridding a Dayton corporation (Whitford won't reveal the name) of dozens of geese that caused at least two people to need hospital treatment after they fell while fleeing aggressive birds.

On one recent day, Shearer used the dog, the pistol and the alarm calls to shoo two geese. But the third, a female that probably had a nest nearby, paddled to the middle of the pond and made clear that she was going nowhere.

"Probably one of the toughest ones I've ever seen," Whitford said.

Dr. Goose sounded impressed.

Joe Blundo is a Dispatch columnist.

jblundo@dispatch.com