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Grape spray sours geese on city's grass

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The city has a new weapon in its arsenal against pesky, poop-dropping Canada geese: a bird repellent spray that smells like grape bubble gum.

The chemical spray, called "bird repellent concentrate" and marketed under the name

Bird Shield, contains methyl-anthranilate, the active ingredient in Concord grapes.

The spray works by making the treated grass distasteful to geese.

"It's like eating something extremely bitter or sour," said Everett Walton of American Pest Management, the con-

tractor that applies the stuff for the city. "It won't hurt you, but you don't want to keep doing it."

Leonard Askham, the scientist from Pullman, Wash., who developed Bird Shield, got the idea after noticing that geese didn't land in vineyards where Concord

grapes were growing.

After hearing about the product, Anchorage parks and recreation workers decided to test it. They sprayed two of the four playing fields at De La Vega in late June. One gallon of the chemical mixed

Please see Back Page, GEESE

GEESE: Repellent spray keeps fowl visitors away

Continued from Page A-1

with 60 gallons of water is enough to treat an acre.

"You don't have to spray everything. If the wind blows the scent over an unsprayed field, the birds won't land there, either," said Jerry Walton of the city's Parks and Recreation Department. "I'm pretty dang impressed."

Parks employees had planned to spray 10 times but stopped after four because all the geese left.

The same thing happened at Westchester Lagoon after three applications. At Jewel Lake, the goose population went from about 200 to about 60, Walton said. The ones that remain have young and won't leave them.

Bootlegger's Cove was a particular success. There, on the beach at the east end of the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, "you couldn't drop a dime without hitting goose grease," said Larry Jones of American Pest Management.

After workers sprayed a 2-acre section of the beach, the geese picked up and moved to a deserted wooded area a quarter of a mile away.

So how safe is the stuff? It has been approved for use by the Environmental Pro-

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tection Agency, is biodegradable and breaks down quickly in sunlight. It won't hurt humans or mammals, Walton said.

"You could drink it if you wanted to," he said. "It tastes kind of like Tabasco sauce, but smells real grapey."

However, the product can be harmful to fish in concentrated amounts. Therefore, use of the spray is limited near fish-bearing water because "it makes them go belly-up," Walton said.

But if it's applied correctly there is no risk of runoff, Walton said.

A polymer in the spray bonds it to grass like a coat of latex paint. It lasts for seven to 10 days, even through rain, or until the grass is mowed.

"It looks like the wax on a car, and smells like grape bubble gum," Jones said.

The product solves a big headache for Walton. Although other members of the Anchorage Waterfowl Working Group are dealing with serious safety issues posed by geese, Walton gets the minor complaints, which are mostly about droppings.

"We've gotten calls from Rollerbladers who slip and fall on the trails because of bird poop," he said. "People can't put a blanket down on the beach, it's all over the sports fields — especially during molting season, when they can't fly — there's bird poop everywhere. It's a big nuisance."

Jones said Bird Shield is not a miracle cure, but only one tool in the city's wider program of bird control, which includes letting grass grow longer and encouraging people not to feed the geese.

Walton said the city has spent \$6,000 so far on the treatment. The chemical costs about \$45 a gallon, and \$180 an acre to apply.

That's a special rate for the city, said Jones, whose company is the only distributor of Bird Shield and related products like Crop Shield and Airport Shield.

For homeowners who want a goose-free, grape-smelling lawn, the stuff costs \$60 a gallon.

Note: This article is from 1997, prices are higher.