

# Canada Geese – A Problem for Water Quality

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Geese on the Kinni near the entrance to Lake George  
Photo by Margaret Smith

When I was a kid in early 1940s River Falls, living on the edge of the Kinnickinnic Rivers' Lake George, there were no Canada Geese. In fact, there was a dearth of water birds beyond the occasional kingfisher. Yet today, there are great numbers of this proud and respectable bird.

What has changed during the last 60 years? According to the Illinois EPA, Canada Geese "are a success story in wildlife management." By the early 1940s over-hunting had reduced Canada goose populations close to extinction. A concerted effort by Federal agencies has brought the Canada goose back to levels where hunting is now actually a necessity to control overpopulation.

A Canada goose paradise would include acres of tender grass, a freshwater pond for drinking water and security, and no predators. An unnaturally low population of predators (especially in urban environs) and abundance of food allows Canada geese to quickly overpopulate an area. It was discovered the Canada goose has a weak migratory instinct "and will stay in place as long as there is ice-free water and food."

An overpopulation of geese coupled with a year round presence creates a water quality problem. Geese eat

plant material on land but are frequently on the water when they defecate. As well, goose waste on land quickly can wash into water bodies with rain or snowmelt runoff. Goose fecal material is high in nutrients which fuel growth of algae and aquatic plants. When the geese become year-round residents, the nutrient impacts are greatly compounded. It has been found that one Canada goose can contribute "about a half pound of the nutrient phosphorus to a lake or river each year". Goose fecal matter also has the potential of raising levels of coliform bacteria in water bodies.

Suggestions for minimizing problems, according to "*Conflict with Canada Geese*" published by the Canadian Wildlife Service, include:

- Do not feed Canada geese.
- Keep grass mowed higher around the edges of ponds or lakes or maintain an un-mowed shoreline buffer of grasses, shrubs and wildflowers.
- Cover pond banks with climbing obstacles.
- Investigate your municipality's management plan for temperate breeding geese.
- Scare techniques may be effective in the short-run but are not effective long term as geese become accustomed to such activities.

Can or should anything be done about goose impacts to local water quality? That is a question many communities are beginning to ask. 🐟