Are Your Feathers Ruffled by Waterfowl?

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it’s good. Some think it’s bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people’s yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

Issues regarding waterfowl have recently made headlines in newspapers. Their grazing on property does not permanently disturb or damage the plants and rarely puts people at odds with these birds. But usually people dislike the fecal matter that waterfowl leave behind. Here is some information about waterfowl and how they can be managed humanely and effectively.

General Information

The general term “waterfowl” is used to describe birds—including geese, swans, and ducks—living in freshwater habitats. All species share the characteristics of webbed feet and flattened bills. Waterfowl are commonly associated with lakes and ponds, but most species spend time on land foraging and nesting. Although all are migratory birds, many remain present year-round in ideal locations. Man-made environments such as golf courses, office parks, artificial ponds, and lakes, and municipal parks often provide waterfowl with irresistible grazing surfaces and an ideal habitat that can support them all year long.

The Canada goose is the species of waterfowl that causes the most conflicts with humans. Canada geese are distinguishable by their large size; black head, bill, and neck; and white cheek patch. They weigh about 12 pounds and have an average wing length of 20 inches. A strongly monogamous species, geese pair at about three years of age, have strong family ties, and often vigorously defend nests and chicks. Canada geese can often be seen and heard flying overhead in a V formation, which allows each bird to fly in the wind draft of the bird in front of it, thereby saving energy. They take turns as the leader. V formation, which allows each bird to fly in the wind draft of the bird in front of it, thereby saving energy. They take turns as the leader.

Waterfowl cause conflicts with humans primarily where land-scape areas and maintained lawns are affected. When grazing, geese do not permanently disturb or physically damage turf. Conflict usually occurs from fecal deposits and the aggregation of a large number of birds. Tolerance, vegetation management (the use of tall grass or other naturally occurring vegetation to deter geese and ducks), fencing, harassment techniques (including the use of trained Border collies), hazing, repellents, and oiling eggs are among the many solutions available for dealing with waterfowl. An integrated approach using a variety of these techniques is the best way to solve conflicts.

Public-Health Concerns

Waterfowl are not a health threat to humans, but large accumulations of their droppings are becoming cause for concern in water quality control at municipal lakes and ponds. The botulism infections of their droppings are transmittable to humans. But large accumulations of their droppings are among the many solutions available for dealing with waterfowl. An integrated approach using a variety of these techniques is the best way to solve conflicts.

Potential conflicts with waterfowl include:

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• The skunk is a small, black, or yellow animal with a white stripe running down the middle of its back. When threatened, a skunk sprays a musky-smelling liquid made from the glands in its tail, and fluffing its fur. It is likely to notice you unless you approach slowly and quietly and you should be able to avoid getting sprayed, since they don’t see well and are unlikely to notice you unless you harm them. Signs that a skunk is about to spray include stamping the ground with its front feet, shaking its tail, and fluffing its fur.

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The following recipe to neutralize skunk odor is safe for pets and other materials.

• Use mild repellents, such as ammonia-soaked rags placed near or inside the burrow (to one side) so the skunk has to pass them to get out.

• If you are sure no young are present, install a one-way door over the den entrance, allowing the animal to leave but preventing its return.

• If a skunk is caught in a window well, carefully and quietly place a rough board in the well so the animal can climb out. Skunks are not good climbers and need something to grip on to.

• Using shiny objects like pinwheels or Mylar balloons and sprinkling cayenne pepper around an area can help to deter skunks. The following recipe to neutralize skunk odor is safe for pets and clothing. Combine:

1 quart of 3% peroxide
1/4 cup baking soda
1 tsp. liquid laundry or dish soap

In addition, using liberal amounts of tomato juice or vinegar will make the odor tolerable.

Public-Health Concerns

Skunks have adapted well to human environments and have taken up residence in and around homes. Here is some information about these animals and how they can be managed humanely and effectively, including how to neutralize their odor.

General Information

Skunks are beneficial, nonaggressive creatures with a unique system of self-defense. If you’ve noticed the persistent faint smell of a skunk, you may have one living around your home or yard. Look for a four-to-six-inch diameter hole near buildings or woodpiles or for a den under a porch or deck. Skunks are omnivorous, primarily eating insects, fruit, eggs, human garbage, and sometimes even small vertebrates such as mice. Skunks have adapted well to human environments and live happily under porches, patios, sheds, and decks as well as in hollow logs, wood or rock piles, and abandoned burrows. Young are usually born in May or June and remain in the nest for about two months before accompanying the mother to forage. Except when young are present, skunks are usually solitary animals. They are primarily nocturnal and can be active throughout the year. If you encounter a skunk, back away slowly and quietly and you should be able to avoid getting sprayed, since they don’t see well and are unlikely to notice you unless you harm them. Signs that a skunk is about to spray include stamping the ground with its front feet, shaking its tail, and fluffing its fur.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

To discourage skunks from moving in with you:

• After exclusion, block or screen entry points to the spaces under your home or other buildings. Be sure the material used extends eight to ten inches underground because skunks are good burrowers.

• Fill openings under concrete structures with dirt.

• Remove all brush piles from your property.

To evict a skunk:

• Place a rough board in the well so the skunk has to pass them to get out.

• Block or screen entry points to the spaces under your home or other buildings. Be sure the material used extends eight to ten inches underground because skunks are good burrowers.

• Fill openings under concrete structures with dirt.

• Remove all brush piles from your property.

Illustration by Chris Hill