

Seeing the Sourlands

Canada Geese

By Jim Amon



Canada Geese are everywhere—there is hardly a park, a corporate lawn or a golf course in the Sourlands that does not have Canada Geese. They are so common that we seldom really see them. Not seeing what is around us is a form of self-improvement so I have decided to take a closer look and find out what is interesting about this ubiquitous bird. The first thing that is revealed from a closer look (literally) is that Canada Geese are really quite handsome, especially if the sun is shining on their white chinstraps and white under parts.

The classic image of these geese is of them migrating south in the fall in a “V” formation, honking as they go. Most of the Canada Geese in our region no longer migrate. We have created an ideal habitat for them by making such extensive lawns, often with ponds, and by removing many of their predators. Further, young geese have to be taught how to migrate and if mom and dad have decided to spend the winter along the D&R Canal, then their offspring will do the same.

They still fly in a “V” formation when they are going from the golf course pond to the park pond because there is such a great advantage in this formation. They are big

heavy birds and it takes a lot of energy to keep aloft, but by flying slightly behind and slightly above the bird in front, each goose can save as much as 70% of the energy required to fly solo. As the lead bird flaps its wings down it pushes the air that is directly behind it down and that, in turn, causes the air that is behind and slightly to the side to rise. This rising air pushes the trailing bird up, making it easier for the follower to fly.

They also still honk as they fly—and seemingly when they do anything else. There are several different theories about their noisy characteristic but it seems that it is simply in their nature to be noisy. Often they appear to be honking from sheer exuberance, especially the young birds. Canada Geese live in extended family flocks and their honking can be explained because they are keeping in touch with family members. The honking is most frequent when they are landing or when there is a predator approaching—times when it is important that every bird in the flock pay attention.

One thing that we all know about Canada Geese is that they create a terrible mess. Every goose can produce between one-half and one pound of waste every day. When we drive past one of those suburban commercial “parks” like ETS or Bristol Myers Squibb and see a thousand or more geese it is like all the untreated waste from a small village dumped on these lawns every day. The runoff from those polluted lawns means that the ponds become terribly polluted, as do the streams that drain the properties.

Most of the year Canada Geese are very docile around humans but in spring, when they are protecting a nest or their goslings, they will sometimes attack approaching people. Be wary at that time, especially if a goose is pumping its head up and down, a display that is a warning of attack. Its peck isn’t much to fear but they have sharp nails on their feet that can hurt.