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Gettin' Chummy with Canada Geese

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Why Geese?

Before retirement, I was in a technical field that pretty well kept me focussed on that, 24/7. No time at all for the beautiful creatures living all around us.

Since retirement, I've discovered that hanging out with wildlife can be very uplifting. Squirrels, birds, chipmunks - they all live very interesting and communicative lives, and some of them can become very friendly, once their ways of looking at life and at people are learned and understood.

Geese have turned out to be very friendly, once they have had positive experiences with humans. Geese in my current wilderness location are very wary of humans, and only some of them can be befriended easily. This essay is to record my experiences with these beautiful Canada Geese, as they pass through my village.

Habits

Canada geese are known for their long migrations. I've discovered that enroute, they will stop over in places offering abundant food and water for several days. My guess is they make several stops on their migration route.

Here in the northern Ontario bush, the geese seek open, grassy fields. They graze all day long on grass, clover, and other greenery. They will break off grazing for naps.

They make occasional trips to nearby ponds or lakes.

Canada geese graze, nap, and visit nearby ponds as family groups. I've observed family groups of perhaps 5 to 8 birds. It appears that these family groups are, in autumn, mom, dad, and the current year's children. Almost all are fully grown, though I have seen a very few fully fledged children who are slightly smaller than the average size.

I've observed family grazing groups grazing in flocks of from maybe 20 to 200 birds.

Making Friends with the Geese

The geese I've encountered in cities to the south are all acclimated to people, and if I have food, and click my mouth, they will trot right over and gratefully accept all the food I have.

With primarily WILD geese, it's more difficult.

When I first started walking out into the grass field they graze in, the entire flock of around 200 birds would walk to the side of the field furthest from where I had entered.

Baby Steps Put Wildlife at Ease

One thing I've learned in hanging out with wildlife is that apparently, a human walking at normal human speed is seen as a significant threat by wildlife who have not yet decided you are a confirmed friend.

The baby step technique is that when you approach wildlife, at some distance away, maybe somewhere between 30 and 100 feet, you start taking literal two-inch steps. With a number of species, doing this has obviously and significantly put the wildlife at ease. It may also help to visibly hold food the animals like in a hand while doing this.

On successive days, you will see whether baby steps are having the effect you hope to achieve.

The baby step technique proved to be an important part of making friends with wild geese.

Sitting Down Puts Wildlife at Ease

This is another important principle which helps make friends with wild animals.

When attempting to befriend a large flock of wild geese, I found that instead of trying to approach them with treats, I sat down on a bench. This started the process of befriending SOME of the flock. In my experience, one family of 5 to 8 made the decision to come over and investigate what I had to offer, after sitting on the bench for some time.

I would enter the field, and use baby steps to go straight to the bench, avoiding any geese enroute as much as possible.

Feeding Other Birds Can Get Geese' Attention

I started introducing treats by first tossing small pieces of bread to a few crows and gulls in the area. This got the attention of a few of the geese.

Flocks of grazing geese always have a few sentries who are looking around and not feeding, so this feeding of other species is very likely to get someone's attention.

At first, I had to toss treats to the family at a distance of between 10 and 15 feet, but gradually, the family came close in, ending up with some of them only a few inches from me as I sat on the bench.

On successive days, the friendly family came right over.

Sharing Treats

I've found by trial and error that fresh, soft, multi-grain bread is a strong favourite. I roll small pieces of the bread into small balls, maybe a half-inch in diameter. The geese seem to find that easier to swallow.

Unless there is plentiful water nearby, I also bring a couple of 1-liter plastic water bottles and a NON-TIP pet water dish, with a wide base. Geese have large feet and will often tip any other style of dish over. (I'm guessing that the geese find taking some water with bread, even fresh moist bread, is easier.)

I learned from a friend who has a bird bath that when she puts fresh tap water into the bath, the birds will not go near it for at least 24 hours. Suspecting it's the chlorine, she sets water out in a large, open container to evaporate the chlorine for 24+ hours before putting that batch of water into the bath. The birds then immediately took to the water which had been exposed to open air for a day prior to use.

I do the same thing with the water I give my geese friends. They haven't complained, but now knowing birds are sensitive to chlorine, as their host, I like giving them the best food and water I can.

Proof Your Treats Are Appreciated

Often, I don't feed a given goose family until they've had all they want - that takes quite a bit of time, and quite a bit of bread for a large goose family. However, when I do feed them all they want, they prove they really do appreciate it by gathering in a semi-circle right at my feet and falling fast asleep!

And they are genuinely sleeping - I can brush past them to leave, and they keep on sleeping.

Nipping

I observe that one goose will nip another's feathers, often the thick downy feathers on the breast, once in a while. After nipping and giving a light tug, the nipper backs off and it does not appear that this gesture was aggression.

Less often, a goose will slowly approach me and nip my slacks. I interpret this as a sign I'm more or less accepted by the family being fed.

I haven't had my skin nipped. If a reader would rather not have a goose nip them, they can simply hiss with their mouth, and the nipping goose will immediately back off. By doing nothing threatening, and just hissing, I find that geese will respect that, and they will not end their friendship.

Other Goose Families

I find that geese will only approach for treats one family unit at a time. All other geese will usually keep their distance. A few will stand maybe 10 to 20 feet away, looking at me, apparently hoping for treats. So I oblige them with a small portion of the treats - when rolled into little balls, the fresh bread can be tossed at least 20 feet.

Sentries

When I'm feeding a goose family, one or maybe two large male sentry geese will also stand maybe 10 to 20 feet away, seemingly on guard for the family being fed. I try to toss them a few bread balls too, however, the sentries don't seem very interested - they are focussed on their security responsibilities.

The sentries watch the directions away from where I'm sitting - they don't seem concerned about any threat I might be to the family being fed.

Competitors

Once in a while, groups of gulls or crows will overfly the area I'm using to hand out treats to the geese. Usually, when they approach, I stop feeding the geese until the other birds are out of the area. Gulls are the main problem species. They will aggressively snatch bread balls tossed to the geese before the geese have a chance to get the treats, if there are only 1 or 2 geese being fed.

I haven't seen gulls challenge a complete family of 5 to 8.

If the gulls start taking all the geese' food, the geese will hiss and open their bills toward the gulls, but geese won't physically assault the gulls. Highly aggressive gulls pretty well always win, and sometimes I simply have to leave the area.

Other times, I have called the gulls away to a different place and fed them peanuts out of the shell until they are satisfied. I can then go back to the geese.

Crows and ravens are rather shy and I haven't seen them challenge the geese.

One Goose Seemed to Understand English

One day, I finished up feeding a goose couple, (the kids weren't interested) and walked about a hundred feet over to a gravel driveway.

A flock of about half a dozen gulls spotted me, and dropped down to ask for treats. I started obliging them with peanuts out of the shell, which they like a lot. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the female goose had followed me the hundred feet and was standing at the edge of the grass, looking hopeful for some more treats.

I turned and said to her, "Honey, I'd like to give you some more food, but these gulls here will snatch anything I give you away."

She did not hesitate a second - she turned around and walked back the hundred feet to her waiting husband. It really did look as if she understood exactly what I said.

What's the Downside?

The main downside for my particular location is that the geese only visit for a couple of weeks in the autumn, mainly. Makes you really appreciate those few days with the beautiful Canada geese.

Other Wildlife Articles

<http://www.randomcollection.info/sqfriends.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/crowchron.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/snail-story.pdf>

<http://www.randomcollection.info/ewrescue.pdf>

REMEMBER ...

AS YOU DRINK THAT WATER, OUR BEAUTIFUL WILDLIFE COMPANIONS NEED IT TOO! AND IN CITIES, IT IS VERY HARD FOR THEM TO FIND!



WEATHER HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY DRY SINCE THE LATE 1990s. **DEW HAS ALMOST DISAPPEARED. PLEASE CONSIDER SETTING OUT WATER DISHES TO PREVENT THE SUFFERING AND DEATH OF OUR BEAUTIFUL WILDLIFE.**

PLEASE CONSIDER DOING THIS IN COOL BUT DRY WEATHER AS WELL ... WINTER CAN BE MERCILESSLY DRY, AND THERE ARE NO LAWN SPRINKLERS! WILDLIFE WILL EAT ICE GLADLY!

THEY WILL APPRECIATE IT!