

# Canada\_Geese

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Andy Kellner, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Christa Hartsook, Olivia Hanlon

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### C Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

### O Olivia Hanlon 00:29

In this episode, I visit with Andy Kellner, wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Today, we're talking about Canada geese. I'm Olivia Hanlon small farms education extension specialist, and we hope you enjoy the show. Andy, welcome. We're glad to have you joining us today.

### A Andy Kellner 00:45

Thank you, Olivia, for having me. I'm excited to be here.

### O Olivia Hanlon 00:49

So Andy, this is your first time on our podcast. So why don't we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and what your role for the DNR consists of?

### A Andy Kellner 00:57

Sure, yeah. And that's great, because some people think of the DNR and depending where you are at in life, or what you do, who knows what comes to mind, right? So I'm in the wildlife Bureau of the DNR and Natural Resources biologist in that bureau. So we're we're not writing tickets to anybody. We're, we're not doing permitting and that stuff. But we really do focus on

wildlife and habitat management and land use. I'm in the depredation program of the Bureau. And so we work with a lot of landowners offering landowner assistance when there's conflicts with wildlife or damages from wildlife, we offer a lot of technical assistance. And what I really strive to do is get folks the answers to their questions or give them the tools that they need to be able to resolve the issues. I'm a firm believer in teaching people to fish instead of just giving them the fish. Outside of that we have we wear many hats. A lot of my duties include the Chronic Wasting Disease Surveillance we do for the deer herd. We do a number of different wildlife surveys. And I also assist with habitat management on some of our state owned public areas. So a little bit, a little bit of a lot of different things. Something different each day Hmm. Oh, that's that's what makes the job. Great.

O

Olivia Hanlon 02:11

All right, so we're talking Canada geese today. So let's get started. Canada geese are pretty common here in Iowa. So why don't we start with talking a little bit about why it's important for us to even be discussing them, especially right now.

A

Andy Kellner 02:23

Sure. Well, I think anytime that you're discussing Canada geese, it is really important for us to kind of look back and remember, Where have we come with Canada geese? Where Where did it all start? What did it go through? And where are we at today. And if you don't have to go back very far in history, and actually Canada geese were not present in Iowa, the populations across the continental US and really in the Midwest were severely reduced to the point where they were extirpated or gone from many of the states, including Iowa, at least considering breeding pairs of geese. So there was no nesting geese. If you go after, you know, the 1930s 40s, there was no nesting geese in the state of Iowa. And that was largely due to massive habitat changes. With a lot of wetlands being drained, there was pretty lax regulations on hunting, you know, in the late 1800s, and early 1900s, which led to a lot of market hunting and overharvest. And there was also even egg collecting, people were just trying to make a living on the landscape, and we're picking up eggs for as a food source and that sort of thing. And in that combination was very detrimental to their population, and it really crashed. So there, there may have still been migrating geese that came through that would have called home or been residents of Canada, the tue, that would have been appropriate time to call them a Canadian. And so that was all we really had. And in the 60s in the 1960s, then it was the Iowa Conservation Commission, along with a lot of other partnering agencies across the US and especially the Midwest made a concerted effort to bring back Canada geese. And so there was efforts where they they brought breeding pairs into certain areas and had designated closed areas where it was for those geese and did a lot of habitat work to bring them about. And it was successful. And I think we see that today. By the early 1990s. We had nesting geese in every county of Iowa. And now we're at a point today where we're seeing an interesting distribution in their populations. It's been actually fairly stable population since the late 2000s. But we're seeing a little bit of shift and distribution as those geese select various sites that they prefer. So with that history, that's where it's good to remember that these are a federally protected bird. It's a it's a migratory bird, that somebody may be enjoying up in Canada one day and then later on in the year they might be enjoying it all the way down in Arkansas. And so it's something that's managed through all those states and provinces together and has a larger framework to be able to operate in. And we don't want it to go back to what it was before. And if it kind of

gets to be free range, everybody does what they want, it would be easy to slide back down that scale. And that's not something we want. So as far as today, we're in mid May, even if the weather feels like August. And, and so what's fun about this time of year is, is now we get all the nests hatching. So Canada geese, they'll they'll migrate through sometimes in the winter, we're seeing groups of birds from Canada, Minnesota, the Dakotas, wherever, then as late winter comes, those birds start to return back to where they've nested before, and are what you could refer to as our resident Canada geese are selecting their nesting sites and getting a little bit territorial about that. And come late March, April, that's when they start nesting. And right now is the time where we're just about at the high point for Canada Goose hatch. And so we're going to be seeing all these little yellow fuzzballs wandering around and in those families are really latched together at this point, and not very mobile, they're tied to wherever they're at right now and can't really get away. And so it's it's this time of year where it's like, okay, I have these geese, they've got young, they're gonna be here for a couple months. What do we do next in that situation?

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Olivia Hanlon 06:26

Absolutely. Andy, you obviously love geese. But not everybody does. Because geese have a tendency of picking spots that we don't always want them to be in what kind of areas are Canada geese specifically attracted to?

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Andy Kellner 06:39

It's a great question, you know, with with covering territory out in rural areas and urban areas, I get to see a wide range of places that he's decided to call home and I am passionate about geese and our natural resources, but I totally understand it. If they're nesting, right by a front door to a business, that's probably not going to be the best thing in the long run. But the important thing to consider for any wildlife, and that's if we're talking about deer or turkeys, or pheasants or grassland bird species, or geese or waterfowl, we're talking about habitat. The every species of wildlife is designed for a specific suite of vegetation types and topography and moisture levels and things like that. So what Canada geese obviously they're waterfowl right there, they're a part of that suite of a wildlife that has they require a component of water bodies. And so that's the first thing they're looking for. But then on top of that, things that that geese are often looking for, is long sight distances. So if if they were out, in you know, the typical what you'd expect out in a wetland setting, they'd be up on a muskrat hut. And that's where they'd set up their nest because they'd be raised a little bit higher above everything else. And muskrats would have cleared a lot of the vegetation right around that area. They could look out and see along ways so they can watch for predators. They can see easy access and movement corridors for their they're thinking about their Gosling's, too, so what's easy to walk to and from food back to water. Waters, the safety spot. And in in a lot of situations around acreage is or an urban areas. The food source is that mowed lawn, it's that wide open area that's been mowed. They can see along ways it's easy to walk around, and it's all the food that they need. So it's that combination, we're putting the kitchen, in the bedroom, and that's what any wildlife is looking for. And it's important to remember to with any migratory waterfowl where those migration pathways are, right, so we're in the Mississippi flyway here in Iowa, we're kind of right in the heart of it. And and that means that there's been a lot of studies with leg bands and in information collected on a lot of different birds, a lot of different waterfowl looking at where they move, and we're right along this region where they come all the way

down from Canada, following these river corridors and funnel through Iowa and you look at the river systems in Iowa and they're leading it with the Missouri on one side of the Mississippi on the other side, and they're following those water bodies. We're also at the kind of the southern end of the prairie pothole region, which is really the high end waterfowl nesting site. So the Prairie Pothole region is that old component of prairies and wetlands mixed together. Now a lot of it's been converted to agricultural ground in Iowa, which is the landscape we're on. But that region is just it's a factory for producing waterfowl. It's that right mix of water and upland vegetation that is perfect for it. So we have this 1000s of years of adapted species for that environment. So when we know we're in the area that they exist in, they've evolved for, and then we're putting the right habitat on the ground within that system, it's going to attract waterfowl, especially Canada geese.

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Olivia Hanlon 10:12

Alright, so to go along with that, if we've got these types of areas on our acreage, or our operation or wherever you may be, and what types of management strategies can people use to deter the geese if they're not wanting them in certain areas?

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Andy Kellner 10:25

Sure. So a lot of what I discussed with folks is, if you're thinking about moving out to an acreage or establishing a pond, it's a good thing to be thinking about it right from the get go and including it in the thought process for, hey, I want to construct a pond out here, what's it going to look like? So that doesn't capture everybody. One of the big things is don't make the right habitat. So what I would say in in, it's becoming just more evident when we're talking water quality, and pollinators and things like that, how beneficial a prairie buffer around a water body can be. So if you set aside, I don't, it can vary based on the topography, but anything from 15 feet to 20 yards of a strip around that that pond, or the waterway that cuts through the area, anything like that, and put it into you know, fairly dense native prairie vegetation, it'll still look nice, you'll still have all those wildflowers in the summer. But that cuts those sight distances off for those geese that can't see. So all of a sudden, they're a little bit more on edge, they're not sure that they're safe. And it's harder to navigate and walk through, especially if you're just a four inch Gosling. And they're considering when they're thinking about setting up home, right? So so I think that's really important to consider what can you do with the habitat. If that's absolutely not an option, then maybe fencing is an option that you could look at maybe putting up snow fencing or some other sort of tight fencing, and make sure it's tight enough that the adults can't go through it, the adults are not going to leave the Gosling's to places that they can't get to. So so that can be a way to kind of mitigate some of that we mentioned earlier that the Canada geese along with all their migratory birds are federally protected, that's under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. So you can't just go out there and shoot them. That's not what we're talking about. Don't think that's a good use of the resource or a wise decision. But what you can do is, is something called aversive conditioning, often referred to as hazing or harassment. So that's something where we're making it uncomfortable for them, we're making really loud noises, where we have a dog in the area that's chasing and barking and swimming in the pond. At night if they're roosting on the pond, a bright laser can be really effective, they they don't like the the laser bouncing off the water and interfering with their eyes, that is an easy way to bust them off of a pond so they don't roost there. Just a multitude of those things put together. And it's made more effective when the habitat isn't

quite right, too. So all of a sudden, they're on edge, you add the verse of conditioning on top of it. And those two things in conjunction with each other can be really strong deterrent for geese. If it's something with migrating birds, during the fall and winter, if you're you know, out in the country, and it's safe to do so, utilizing hunting can be a great way to it's a recreation thing, or there's hunters out there. So it's an available resource for you. And it's something where the hunters really appreciate the chance to harvest this this meat and take it home and use it for food. And don't listen to anybody that says that Canada Goose doesn't taste good. They've just cooked it wrong . It is very good. But that's that's something to consider too. That can be very effective. It's just basically like extreme hazing, but follow all the statewide and the federal regulations for it.

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Olivia Hanlon 13:46

Okay. All right. So we talked about Habitat being a main attractant for these geese. What other kinds of things would attract us to our acreage or our farm in places that we may not want them.

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Andy Kellner 13:59

So there's any a number of things that could potentially attract wildlife to an area habitat being the key thing, the next biggest thing that's going to attract any wildlife, and again, that this this is for more than just geese, but we're talking squirrels, raccoons, coyotes, deer, anything you name it, the next biggest thing is going to be food, any sort of additional food source or artificial feed out there is going to attract them. So while it may be fun to take the kids out and go throw some food to the geese to watch them gobble it up. It really isn't doing the resource any good. It's not the proper treatment and ethical treatment of these wild animals. And it's going to congregate them in areas that we may actually not want them to be in the long term. It's also one of the things to consider is anytime that you're having that sort of interaction, you're breaking down the barrier between wildlife and people, right. And so when that barrier gets busted there or maybe a situation that comes up at some point where maybe it's somebody that doesn't like geese, and they happen to walk by, and that goose is associating people with food. And so they walk up and approach that person, that person is afraid of a goose and to no fault of their own. So that's already an uncomfortable situation. Or honestly, if we're training our kids to go feed geese, and they try to go feed a goose in April when it's sitting on a nest, that's not going to end well. So there's there's a number of reasons not to feed geese, most of the things that people are feeding them are actually not good for the goose's diet. So so don't do that take away that our artificial food source, and they will survive just fine on their own. So let's not do that something else, especially with small acreage is with we got people that are doing like some farming stuff, looking at what your crop rotation is, in how close to a water body, you're having certain things that you're planting is really important. So again, geese like that wide open landscape, right. So we sometimes run into issues when corn or beans or something low that's in a lot of rows is planted really close to water, it's a makes that short vegetation that they can see in and as a really ideal food source for geese. So they come up, and sometimes we'll utilize that it's actually a strategy for some wildlife managers to plant like fields of winter wheat that are short during this time of year short and green next to water to specifically attract geese to try to draw them out to that spot, so they're not causing damage in other places. So if you have something that's going to resemble that maybe be keen on where you're putting it on the farm and proximity. The other thing and

obviously we'll hit on this later, it's on everybody's mind right now. But the presence of other waterfowl, if you have a backyard flock of ducks and geese, any hunter will tell you that it's it's much easier to hunt, geese or ducks when you're using decoys, right? And live birds will always be the decoy. So if you have ducks out in the pond, maybe look at some key times when we're at high migration periods, and keep the keep your waterfowl in so they're not acting as an attractant to draw in other birds that are migrating through, it just might be something to consider.

O Olivia Hanlon 17:19

But if there are areas we really don't want to use to go, how can we keep them out? And when do we need to worry about them? We've hit on this a little bit. But if you've got anything to add for this,

A Andy Kellner 17:28

yeah, again, paying attention to that timeline is really important. So where we're at in May right now is is these nesting geese wether they're just hatching? So they're going to be pretty bound to the area for a while. And geese do a remarkable thing. So so all birds shed their feathers and replace them throughout the year just like mammals, we shed our hair and replace it birds shed their feathers. It's specifically it's called molting. So what's interesting about Canada geese, they molt all of their flight feathers at once. So that renders even adult geese flightless for a period of time in the summer. And it corresponds to when their Gosling's are getting bigger. And but before the Gosling's can fly, so there's a period of time from June and through July, where the Gosling's are too young to fly, and the adults can't fly either. So they're bound to wherever they can walk to and swim to. So that's where fencing can be really great option for right now, if there's certain spots like a side of the pond, you don't want them coming up on right now, fence it off, you know, it can be temporary fencing, like snow fence or something like that. But you're going to impede that traffic that way and maybe mow an area on the other side of the pond do what what you might call a sacrifice area, to utilize it that way. But as far as as other times the year, if you don't want geese during the spring and summertime, then it's really important to target geese in late winter, if you can make it so they don't want to nest on your property or on the water body that's near you, then you can alleviate all that summer pressure. So doing as much of that aversive conditioning in February and March as you can, will be really important to keeping you kind of goose free if that's your goal for the summertime. So that's I think that's the big takeaway there.

O Olivia Hanlon 19:23

Okay and so we talked about those families finding areas that they like, once they found somewhere that they like, Andy, will they come back each year to the same area to nest?

A Andy Kellner 19:32

Yeah, the short answer is yes. And we probably don't have time for the really long answer. But it is amazing how they will come back to the exact same spot. I have gone and looked at some goose nests where I can see the layers of nests and the old shells from previous years just

goose nests where I can see the layers of nests and the old shens from previous years just stacked right on top of each other, even in places as silly as rooftop building in Des Moines. So once they've had a successful nest somewhere they're going to be very inclined, they're very tired to come back to that spot. And that's why actually like relocations of these birds doesn't really work because you could move that bird from a nest and take her, you know, 100 miles. And she'll just come right back to it, which is pretty, pretty profound and pretty amazing. The, the other thing to consider is geese tend to return to wherever they learn to fly. So if you are raising some Gosling's, if it's not uncomfortable for them enough, once they do learn to fly, that they go to a different area, there's a strong chance that they're coming back to that, you know, that water body, or at least that region to the following years.

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Olivia Hanlon 20:39

Very interesting. So we talked a little bit about keeping them out, and but what kind of problems may we run into with Canada geese on our farm or acreage if we don't take some of these steps to keep them away?

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Andy Kellner 20:50

Sure. So, you know, as the distribution of geese in Iowa has been shifting a little bit, we've been running into it a little bit less. But I mean, geese are active grazers, they're going to eat a lot. And so if you are trying to raise some crops or something like that on your acreage, or , we always have to consider what's happening on the other side of the fence, too, if you have a pond, and you'd like to see the geese, be aware of what they might be doing when they're walking over to the neighbor's cornfield, they can do quite a bit of damage. And that was one of the biggest hurdles initially when the Canada goose populations were being reintroduced. And and as they started to grow was a lot of agricultural damage in areas. So that's certainly something to be aware of a very common thing and our waterfowl biologist stated that their high fiber diet kind of doesn't end with ease comes comes with everything they leave to. So if you have a pond that you're wanting to use for a lot of recreation and fishing and stuff like that. If there's a large goose population there, you may have all the deposits that they're leaving behind too.

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Olivia Hanlon 21:55

Okay, so along that problem path here, Andy, we've heard a lot about avian influenza recently, especially in migratory birds. Are there any concerns around Canada geese, and avian influenza? Particularly if we have birds.

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Andy Kellner 22:09

Oh, it's a great question. Obviously, this this year in 2022, we're, we're keenly aware with all that going on. And in the one good thing about it being so hot right now is maybe, maybe we're going to be getting over this hurdle, because that's kind of the key thing. They look for is, end of the migration and in that warming up. So that's good. But yeah, I think keeping biosecurity and in that mentality of defending your own flock needs to be top priority right now. Because there's certainly the possibility that a Canada Goose could be a reservoir for that disease. So

the Canada geese aren't moving around so much anymore. Like I said, we're getting to the spot where they're, they're hatching, and in any of them that have a family group are most likely staying put. Now there are some birds that are going to go on additional migrations further north to go through that molting process we talked about further north, even as far north as the Arctic Circle, which is interesting in its own story for a different day. What we're really looking at is the migration period, there's a lot of other birds migrating through. So take any of the steps you can if this is a concern, and you have a backyard flock to keep waterfowl and any of those birds off the pond, if you can, recognizing that if they have young, they're kind of stuck in that area for a while. And if you got to close up your own flock and keep them out of those water bodies, it's best to do that for until it's really get into the warmer months. And we're kind of safely past the peak of avian influenza. So it's really you have the control in your hands of being able to keep all that stuff in and do everything you can with washing boots, if you go down to go fishing at the ponds, you know, change boots, don't use those same boots for when you're going in and feeding your ducks or geese or anything like that. I would just reiterate that you need to be in control of everything you have control over and that just comes down to good biosecurity.

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Olivia Hanlon 24:01

Okay, Andy, I have one last question for you. We've taken kind of a view from them being a problem on our acreage is but what if we've got folks out there who are just really into wildlife, and I want to see these geese out there? What are some of the benefits to having Canada geese out on our acreage?

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Andy Kellner 24:18

Sure, no. And that's awesome. You know, in my job, it's so easy to get kind of curmudgeonly, because we usually get phone calls when when there's a conflict. So I love it when we get to talk about you know, some of the positive things. So they're, they're native natural resource to Iowa. So that's tremendous. There are natural grazers. So they're a natural vegetation controller, whether it's some of the aquatic vegetation, but also then your Shoreline habitat stuff. And so that's pretty important. They they work in conjunction with muskrats and other wetland species in that community. So they're just a component of how that all works together. And you know what, they're this this amazing symbol of spring as they show back up in the late winter, early spring. And I mean, what's fascinating about my job is my complaint phone calls, as those goslings hatch disappear, because nobody, nobody doesn't love seeing little goslings. So it's just really fun to have them around and see that part of it. And also, it's an opportunity for outdoor recreation later on to, you know, any hunters you talk to. They love the whole cycle of life and learning more about these animals. They're tremendous with the places they go in and what they do. So it's something to that having that out in the country or outside of city limits. Having a huntable population is something that a lot of people would love to have that opportunity as well.

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Olivia Hanlon 25:43

For sure. So if folks are wanting more information on anything that we covered today, Andy, or if they have any more questions, and where should they look? Or who should they reach out to?

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Andy Kellner 25:53

Well, you can certainly reach out to me, my number is 515-975-8318. And I'd love to chat geese, that that number can be found along with your local depredation contact person on our DNR website. It's a little bit cumbersome, but it's under hunting and landowner assistance. There's stuff in there about nuisance wildlife control operators. And then there's more information about the our depredation program and the wildlife damage Management tab, or you can just do a search for depredation on our iowa dnr.gov website. And we'd love to help you out if you're looking at stuff or hear the stories that the success stories that you've had, maybe I appreciate any input we can get there.

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Olivia Hanlon 26:35

All right, Andy, we've covered lots of good information here today. Is there anything that we didn't get covered that you'd like to add?

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Andy Kellner 26:41

Oh, man, we, we could go on and on. But I have taken enough rambling time. I think I just they really are remarkable species. I think Canada geese are just a brilliant conservation success story. And it's a marvelous to be able to look out and see this native natural resource so abundant. When I mean this is less than 100 years ago. This is you know, a lot of our grandparents or even parents that didn't get to see it because it was gone from the state of Iowa. So we have the capacity to shape where these birds reside, and to mitigate any possible conflicts, which is what we're all about, and still be able to recognize and cherish Canada geese for what they are, and that's a wildlife species native and recovered in North America.

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Olivia Hanlon 27:26

Awesome. Well, thank you very much for joining us today, Andy, and we look forward to hopefully having you back in the future.

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Andy Kellner 27:32

Yeah, thanks, Olivia. I look forward to coming back.

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Iowa State University Extension and Outreach 27:35

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