

Canada Geese from London to Alton

- Canada Geese are natives of North America and there are several subspecies. Most are smaller birds than our Canada Geese and they typically migrate long distances of around 200 miles spending the winter in the south and the summer breeding seasons in the north and Canada. They are not on one site for 10 months of the year as are our subspecies *maxima* and consequently are liked and give no problems. They are still on the protected list in the USA as numbers were severely depleted by the shooting tradition on that continent. They live near water and feed on grassland alongside. Migration is a common solution in the bird world to seasonal food shortage. However, in more recent time the large strain *maxima* has established on amenity lakes and grassland alongside in America where it only migrates for around two months and does not travel far even in its native land. Therefore in these situations they have become a pest, creating the same problems as they do here and public feeding augments the problem. See the website www.interpretiveservices.IN.gov. The truth about Canada Geese. (Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife).
- Canada Geese have long been introduced to Britain for wildfowl collections, often pinioned (clipped wings so cannot fly away) but on moulting they regain flight and they have spread and bred in the wild so are naturalised but are non-native species. The heavier bird seems to escape predators and is a more successful breeder than the lighter weight birds of America and because of its size has a greater impact on water quality and droppings on grass as well as being on site for ten months of the year.
- The present population of Canada Geese at King's Pond seem to have originated from London. W H Hudson in his *Birds of London* (1898) makes no mention of them, nor does E M Nicholson writing up his census of birds in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens in 1925. However R F Sanderson of the Royal Parks in his census of 1975 recorded 59 geese. He describes the situation as "A feral population established from introduced birds and supplemented by additions from outlying feral populations. Full-winged birds were released in Hyde Park in 1955" with some "pinioned birds were introduced there in 1962, since when breeding took place unchecked every year until the mid-1980s when egg pricking began...". "The highest count was on 31st January 1987, when 553 were present..." "In Greater London as a whole numbers of Canada Geese were three times higher in 1991 than in 1983.....An extensive ringing programme took place during the moult in 1994 throughout Greater London." In the first 12 months 60 geese had been ringed in Battersea Park.
- Canada Geese spread to a number of London lakes and this was recorded by the London Natural History Society in their annual *London Bird Report* and also in the society's journal *The London Naturalist*. The spread through Surrey is followed up in *Birds of Surrey* by Jeffrey Wheatley (2008) and in Hampshire in *Birds of Hampshire* by J M Clark and J A Eyre, 1993.
- When I came to live in Alton in April 1979 there were no Canada Geese at King's Pond and they were not included in the first King's Pond trail leaflet of 1984. They established in the late 1980s and 1990s and were on site when the last dredging of the pond was done in 1996-7: they were unbothered by the dredging and roosted on the barges! When the large island started to develop herbaceous vegetation (from seeds in the mud dredgings) they started to nest on the island. Numbers built up. After investigating the methods of humane control with the RSPCA Wildlife Division and the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust at Slimbridge and obtaining the booklet *Management of Canada Geese* by DETR the Alton Town Clerk (Colin Gay) applied for a licence from DETR for the oiling of Canada Geese and a report was sent

every year. In the early days 11 nests were on the large island and with an average of seven eggs/nest we oiled around 77 eggs. In the case where the clutch was not complete about two eggs were laid subsequently and hatched as we did not have the manpower of volunteers (Northern Wey Trust, Alton Society and Alton Natural History Society) to handle the large Town Council punt at a weekend date. Annual egg oiling has continued with a break in 2019 when a member of the public obstructed (it was then down to ATC staff and June Chatfield) and during 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid pandemic restrictions of social distance. Egg oiling was resumed in 2022 and in 2023, when eight nests and 44 eggs were oiled. Whilst there were some goslings hatched from later laid eggs in 2022, it appears that none hatched in 2023.

- King's Pond ticks many of the requirement boxes for Canada Geese. These are a large body of water, adjacent amenity mown grass, two islands for roosting and nesting (although in recent years the small island has been waterlogged and unsuitable for nesting) and uncontrolled and abundant feeding by the general public. Map work has shown that the large island was created in 1973 when the Alton Urban District Council took possession of King's Pond and dredged it: making an island was a convenient economical way of dealing with the silt. Studies elsewhere (*The London Lakes Project* 1994) and overseas in Indiana (see website above) all point to public feeding being an important driver of the build-up of large unsustainable populations of Canada Geese. This was also confirmed in a Management Plan of King's Pond by John Day commissioned by Alton Town Council.
- The resident population is around 30+ birds with up to 4 pairs finding a nesting site and the rest hopeful hangers on. After the moult at the end of June (during which, with loss of wing primary feathers the birds are flightless, and dependent on land alongside the pond for feeding. Birds from elsewhere fly in so the late summer population can build up to 100 birds. Being large birds, with large appetites they leave copious droppings on the grass and pathways as well as probably directly into the pond. This leads to pollution of the pond with high nutrients and bacteria leading to poor water quality that is fed downstream to the River Wey as the river runs on-line through the pond. We urgently need to analyse the water (turbidity, nutrients, *E. coli* bacteria, cyanobacteria - toxic to dogs) both from the river above the pond in Ashdell Road, the pond itself in various locations, below the gauging weir in Waterside Court and in the river opposite in Papermill Lane where the water of the "Lasham Drain" spring water are mixed and also at the foot of the Newman Lane steps where June Chatfield has been monitoring the freshwater life since 1994 to present time. We also need to investigate the interactions of the other waterfowl with the Canada Geese as these have now taken over dominance from the Mallard which remain steady at 80-100 but with decreased breeding success as they are largely excluded from the large island by the Canada Geese.
- Public feeding is mentioned by W H Hudson in *Birds of London* (1898) and he notes some birds that seem to adapt to human presence and thrive. Canada Geese were not part of the story then but he mentions Wood Pigeons and Black-headed Gulls that are also regular parts of King's Pond bird fauna. Whilst the Wood Pigeons are present all year and are noticeably obese from public feeding, Black-headed Gulls (a flock of around 60 birds) is here for winter only and does not associate so directly with man, although this was not so in London in 1898. In *Birdwatching in London* (1995) Nicholson, from his experience in the 1920s, was aware how living in proximity to man and being fed by him **had dramatically altered the**

behaviour of Mallards in London. In the countryside they were mostly feeding at dusk but in town park lakes were feeding in daytime, when people were around to benefit from.

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