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Ajax roundup a mild goose chase

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PICKERING -- A wild goose chase it wasn't.

There was nothing unruly about the 60 Canada geese who waddled calmly into captivity on Pickering's waterfront Thursday morning. A half-hearted attempt to head off a lone straggler hardly counts as a hot pursuit.

No, nary a peep nor ruffled feather marked the annual goose roundup in a neighbourhood park on Frenchman's Bay.

And that's just how the team of 10 wranglers from the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority planned it.

"We do it humanely, with as little stress to the birds as possible," says project manager Danny Moro.

The goal of the roundup, which takes place from Ajax to Mississauga in the second half of June, is to relocate the bothersome birds. Each year between 1,500 and 2,000 feathered foes make the long drive by 18-wheeler to wetlands outside the GTA.

Grounded by the loss of flight feathers due to moulting season, the birds are sitting ducks for the trained wildlife handlers.

The handlers take up positions behind bushes and head out in motorboats toward unsuspecting flocks floating in the bay.

"The goal," Moro explains, "is to get them all together and push them gently in at once."

Right on cue, the gaggle takes a gander at a decoy sitting inside a makeshift pen on the shore and marches obediently out of the water into a waiting trailer.

Homeowners and park users aren't sorry to see them go.

"They're the worst animal around," fumes one man, complaining that they chase his dogs and make a mess of his pool and docks. "It's disgusting."

The birds need to be controlled, agrees Colleen McMahon, watching her step as she walks her Newfoundland dogs through the park.



CARLOS OSORIO/Torstar News servi

Canada geese waddle inland after being rounded up on Frenchman's Bay in Pickering. Every year, the birds are relocated to wetlands outside the GTA. June 30, 2011

"There's so much goose crap everywhere" the city has to power-wash the paths, she says.

The roundup is just one measure municipalities take to cut the number of grass-guzzlers, says Moro. Pickering's arsenal includes scare tactics such as dogs and birds of prey, oiling eggs and posting do-not-feed signs.

The relocation program started on the Toronto Islands 20 years ago. It spread along Lake Ontario's shoreline as geese populations grew.

But it's working, says Moro, noting they now bag about half as many geese as they used to.

There's still at least one goose on the loose in Frenchman's Bay, last seen paddling south toward the angry homeowner's place.

But don't think he'll be alone for long. Some 10 to 15 per cent find their way back once their feathers grow in.

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