

The art of

persu

**When called to task,
the Border Collies
of Virginia's Geese
Police help
convince flocks
to nest elsewhere**

By Taylor Ham

Ace, one of Cathy Fiddler's
Border Collies, is suited up and
ready for a day's work.

2 working dogs

Article number two in a three-part series

asfion

On a typical summer morning, my Basset Hound puppy lazily rolls over in bed and practically begs me though droopy eyelids to let him sleep just a bit longer. Over in Leesburg, Virginia, however, Cathy Fiddler's Border Collies Ace, Bet and Scat are up at dawn, tails wagging, eager to begin a hard day of work. Early summer is prime nesting season for Canada geese, and this dynamic trio has an important job to do—goose patrol.

The Trouble with Geese

The Canada geese's signature "V" flight makes them one of the most widely recognized waterfowl species in North America. What was once a bird whose distinctive migration symbolized the changing seasons, has now become something else entirely—a nuisance. In the past few decades, Canada geese have drastically altered their lifestyles in response to changing landscapes that favor manicured lawns, parklands and artificial ponds where they find plenty of food and protection from predators. Wildlife biologists estimate that the resident Canada goose population is increasing by 15 percent annually and say their sheer numbers are quickly overwhelming habitats. According to Charles Smith, Senior Natural Resource Specialist for the Fairfax County Park Authority, the geese cause a great deal of localized environmental damage by ripping up native plants along shorelines and producing huge amounts of feces that pollute water bodies. "It's an economic issue as well," Smith says. "Local golf courses devote up to two full-time staff members and spend about \$30,000 a year just cleaning up goose droppings." As it is a federally protected migratory species, options for controlling the population of Canada geese are limited. Strategies such as noise makers, balloons and decoys often fail as geese adapt to them. Smith and his colleagues recommend an integrated approach that includes landscape management and harassment techniques to make potential nesting areas less goose-friendly. "One of the most effective methods we've found," Smith says, "has been the use of trained Border Collies."

An Idea Is Hatched

This is where Ace, Bet and Scat come in. These three beautiful Border Collies are the hard working employ-

ees of Geese Police of Virginia, a company Alexandria native Cathy Fiddler started in 1999 in response to the increasing demand for goose control services in Northern Virginia. The idea for this unique business came to Cathy quite unexpectedly, when she acquired "Tippy," a Border Collie mix puppy who proved to be too energetic for her father-in-law's quiet lifestyle. "Tippy got into an unbelievable amount of trouble," Cathy says. "She would knock over trash cans, take off chasing deer across the fields and create a whole host of other problems." Determined not to give up on such an affectionate and intelligent dog, Cathy searched the internet for information about Border Collies and soon became involved in Frisbee and sheep herding competitions in an effort to give Tippy something to do that would "tire her out." It was at a Frisbee event that she met a fellow competitor who was using his Border Collie to remove geese from golf courses in Pennsylvania. This was enough to fuel Cathy's entrepreneurial spirit, and before long she and Tippy became the co-founders of a fledgling company dedicated to the humane removal of geese from commercial properties in Northern Virginia. Although her partner, Tippy, passed away in May of 2004, Cathy still honors her as the matriarch of Geese Police of Virginia.

Geese Police of Virginia now employs four full-time (two-legged) employees and three working Border Collies as a franchise of New Jersey-based Geese Police, Inc. From late February to early June, Cathy and her team go out every day to look for Canada geese on their clients' properties. The goal is for the dogs to harass the geese enough to make them leave the area. Although the geese are never hurt, they perceive the dogs as natural predators like wolves or coyotes. The presence of these faux predators a few times each day is usually enough to

Action shots of Ace were taken by Bev Hollis for NOVADog Magazine. To see more of her work or to schedule an appointment, visit www.bevhollisphoto.com.

Border Collies have a unique wolf-like glance called the "eye," which, along with their predator-like stalking movements, influences the stock (geese in this instance) to move along.





convince the geese to find a “safer” place to nest. The process is not harmful to the geese and is recommended by both the Humane Society and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) as part of an integrated management plan. Before Rob Dickey, area operations manager of Extended Stay Hotels, became a client of Cathy’s he thought he had tried everything to rid the Chantilly, VA, resort property of geese. Now he recommends the Geese Police to everyone. “These dogs are absolutely amazing,” he says. “They know exactly what their job is and don’t stop until it is done.”

There are currently eight Geese Police franchises in the United States, and each uses only purebred Border Collies from approved breeders. In the goose control business, it is of utmost importance that the dogs are specially trained to herd and harass but never to touch the geese or goslings. Each dog attends a Geese Police “boot camp,” where they

are required to pass a series of tests before embarking on a career in goose control. This intensive training may take up to a year to complete, and a highly trained Border Collie can cost between \$2,000 and \$6,000 dollars.

Cathy attributes the success of her business to the Border Collie’s unique qualities and capacity for work. The breed originated in the 19th century on the border of England and Scotland and quickly became known for the incredible endurance, intelligence and herding instinct that made them highly valuable for working sheep. The Border Collie is the only breed of dog that has the “eye,” a menacing stalking movement and intense wolf-like stare that allows them to direct livestock with just a glance. Unlike some breeds of hunting dogs, the Border Collie does not have the instinct to kill, grab or retrieve. “Their reward is only to make you happy,” Cathy says, “which makes them an absolute pleasure to work with.” These characteristics also make them perfect for goose control.

All in a Day’s Work

When Cathy pulls into her client’s site and opens the door to Ace’s crate, he is already

fixated on the job at hand. He is looking for the geese before his paws even hit the ground, and as he works the area it is easy to see why eight-year-old Ace was voted Geese Police of Virginia’s “Employee of the Year.” After spotting geese in a nearby pond, Cathy directs him to “come by,” and Ace shoots off like a rocket clockwise around the pond until he is directly opposite Cathy, where he crouches menacingly and stares down his adversaries. Ace’s speed and intensity is impressive, and yet with a spoken command or sound from her whistle Cathy can send him in the opposite direction or call him back to her side. Ace works diligently, never losing focus until the last goose takes to the air. “That’ll do,” Cathy says, and Ace leaps out of the water, looking positively proud of the great job he has done. After giving a good shake, he gets a loving pat from his boss and leaps back into the truck, ready for another wild goose chase. **ND**

Taylor Ham is a freelance writer from Ithaca, NY. She currently lives in Alexandria, VA, with her husband Stephen and two dogs, Samson and TJ.

Virginia Greyhound Adoption®
 PO Box 2059
 Spotsylvania, VA 22335
 703-288-4649
 VirginiaGreyhounds.org



In a racing kennel in Florida, your new best friend is waiting for you! Please bring her home before her time runs out!

Personalized adoptions, thorough personality and medical testing is done for each greyhound in the rescue program.

Our dog is a novadog



Faith Buttercup, owned by Julie and Ricardo, is a rescued Pit Bull Terrier, and a socialite in every respect. She has attended the Washington Humane Society’s Bark Ball and Sugar and Champagne every year in outfits imported from the Virgin Islands.

She loves swimming in her in-ground pool, chasing the surf at the beach, car rides, and spending early evenings at sidewalk cafes.

Her favorite treat is a Kong stuffed with peanut butter, and she knows which door to knock for more (her treat closet!). She loves to play with children and can never get too much attention from strangers, in her efforts to make new friends.

Don’t miss an issue...Subscribe Today!
www.novadogmagazine.com