

Why Geese Matter

By Marc Bekoff

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Geese are sentient, emotional beings who connect many people to nature.

This essay is dedicated to the [memory](#) of award-winning journalist and wildlife advocate [Mary Lou Simms](#) who, at the time of her death, was working on a book of short stories called *Almost Human: The Hidden Lives of Geese*. I had the pleasure of working with her on a number of projects.

Denver's geese killing program has got it all wrong

Geese are sentient, highly emotional beings who connect countless people to nature. Despite their natural beauty and the value they add to a wide variety of urban landscapes, geese all too often are labeled as "pests" and routinely killed in heinous and inhumane ways without any sort of respect or decency for who they truly are. Denver is guilty of such violence. [United Poultry Concern's President Dr. Karen Davis](#) notes, "It's quite likely the geese were gassed to death with carbon dioxide while in the transport crates: a slow, agonizing death of suffocation, terror, [panic](#) and pain. Individual birds die at different rates as individuals and it can take many hours for them all to be dead. Also, a bird who seemed dead can revive and will then likely be strangled, beaten with a bat or some other bludgeoning instrument, or both."

In 2019, at the behest of Denver Parks & Recreation (DPR), [Wildlife Services](#), a program of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that is well-known for its rampant killing ways, slaughtered more than 1600 geese across the city of Denver, and in 2020 they killed more than 400 geese.¹

As of today, DPR have said there will be no more killing in 2020 and that killing will be unnecessary in 2021. Officials of DPR have not yet put in writing that it will employ only non-lethal options in 2021, despite the fact that many such alternatives are readily available, including stopping geese from landing and nesting in the first place, growing grasses that do not attract the geese, hazing, using model predators, and using drones to scare-off or deter the geese who come to Denver parks because they contain many features the geese love.² Many of the same people who welcomed them with open arms suddenly favor killing them. Some who are responsible for killing these fascinating birds claim they really don't like doing it, but *have* to because they have no choice. Taking a life is serious business, so it's difficult to understand why they kill these birds when they say they really don't want to and non-lethal options are readily available.

Make no mistake about it: geese are intelligent, sentient, and emotional beings who feel a variety of different emotions, including [grief](#). As Mary Lou Simms put it, they have rich inner and hidden lives.

Killing geese breaks up families and friendships, and the geese suffer and don't like it. Nobel prize-winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz once [wrote](#), "A greylag goose that has lost its partner shows all the symptoms that [developmental psychologist] John Bowlby has described in young human children in his famous book *Infant Grief*...the eyes sink deep into their sockets, and the individual has an overall drooping experience, literally letting the head hang..."



Geese at Garland Park, Denver

Geese also are good for people who enjoy going out to see them and find peace in the simplicity of being outdoors among wildlife. Often people don't realize how much the geese meant to them until they're gone. Among the many emails I've received in the past year, one stands out that really moved me, and I quote it with the writer's permission.

Anna wrote:

"Hello. Thank you for being against the culling of the Wash Park geese. I have watched them in the dawn hours many many times. I am so sad that they were killed. I took thousands of pictures of them. I am too sad now to walk to the park. Has there been any study that you know of, of the psychological implications of killing all of these lovely birds that people have grown to know and love? One reason I walk is to help with [depression](#), and the geese being gone make me so sad...I am actually grieving right now, as I unknowingly documented the geese for almost a year and a half. I didn't realize how strong of a connection I had to them, until I drove around the park and saw them gone. I adored the geese and delighted in them building nests in the trees. Hissing at me or a dog that I was walking. Covered with snow. [Sleeping](#) and stretching in the morning. Herding their babies."

Anna's story, like so many I've received, reminded me of Rachel Carson's classic book *Silent Spring*. People didn't realize the impact of environmental poisons, including pesticides, until the birds stopped singing and the silence was haunting and deafening.

For those familiar with the [One Health movement](#), it's not surprising that caring for geese and other nonhumans is also good for humans, a win-win for all. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) characterize the One Health movement as follows: "One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach—working at the local, regional, national, and global levels—with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment. One Health is an approach that recognizes that the health of people is closely connected to the health of animals and our shared environment. One Health is not new, but it has become more

important in recent years. This is because many factors have changed interactions between people, animals, plants, and our environment."

There's no reason at all to kill the geese. And killing during the current pandemic is even more egregious, at a time when people need connections to nature even more than usual. Denver's killing sprees have attracted national and international notoriety, and many well-known scientists and conservationists agree that killing the geese has no place on the menu of options available for urban wildlife [management](#). In a letter to Denver Parks & Recreation, renowned conservationist [Dr. Jane Goodall](#) wrote:

"I am aware that geese once again are being culled in Denver. I know that approximately 1600 were killed last year and this year it's possible that as many as 4000 geese may be removed. I urge you to stop using lethal methods that most likely will have to be used yearly, and adopt non-lethal measures to manage the geese. In some other locations eggs have been oiled so they do not hatch, goose droppings have been mowed up, grasses that do not attract geese have been planted to replace vegetation the geese actually prefer, and model predators and other deterrents have been used successfully. All of these also are less costly than lethal methods. Thank you for considering my request."

Along the same lines, Dr. Jill Robinson, Founder and CEO of [Animals Asia Foundation](#) wrote:

"The decision to kill resident Canada geese by Denver Parks and Recreation and its contractor, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services Division flies in the face of the law and the advice of experts, and ignores appeals from those in the local community who are calling for the humane treatment of this species. Numerous humane alternatives to control the population have been offered but still the killing is set to go ahead, leaving those of us across the globe astonished with such a decision at a time when such ignorance and disregard towards animals is showing such disastrous effects, to them and to humankind. If we want to survive we need to create a healthier world that respects [the environment](#) and all the species with whom we share it. Cruelty has led us here, and the only cure is kindness."

Marlon Reis, the First Gentleman of Colorado, [is against killing the geese](#), also has [weighed in on Denver's killing sprees](#), and [has asked Denver to "exhaust all non-lethal options."](#)³ He notes, "year-to-year culling of urban wildlife is 'costly to taxpayers, scientifically ineffective as a long-term solution, and woefully inhumane.'" We're also [told](#), "Officials with Denver Parks and Rec say they've tried hazing the geese and oiling eggs to keep them from hatching, but those methods have not been very successful at keeping parks clean." However, requests to see the actual data from their studies haven't been honored, and it's not possible to assess what "have not been very successful" really means. It would be nice to see the data so that an independent assessment could be made.

Where to from here?

[Cruelty can't stand the spotlight](#), and Denver's reputation has suffered terribly because of its choice to slaughter geese in many of its frequently visited parks around the city. What many people don't realize is that killing will have to be an annual affair, a yearly bloodbath. It's high time for Denver to do the right thing and commit publicly to no more killing in the years ahead. Doing so will go a long way toward helping rekindle its former image as a beautiful city worth visiting. Killing simply doesn't work, and even if it did, it's ethically indefensible. It's nothing more than a fast, temporary, and violent solution that violates codes of decency, respect, and compassion. Surely, Denver can and should do better. Let's hope they commit to taking killing off future menus of options.

References

Notes

1) At Sloan's Lake, 227 geese were killed; at Harvey Park, 55 geese were killed; at Garfield Lake, 125 geese were killed; and at Garland Lake, 110 geese were killed.

2) For details see: [Geese-Human Relationships Offer Lessons for Coexistence; Dogs, Geese, Speciesism, and Compassionate Conservation](#); [Killing Denver's Sentient Geese is Flawed in Many Ways](#). (The round-up and slaughter of geese are biologically and ethically unsound.); [The Healing Power of Geese and Other Animals](#). (Geese and other animals can lift people out of depression and a "deep funk.")

3) [As First Gentleman of Colorado](#), I am proud to lend my voice to the cause of advancing the welfare and well-being of all animals. It will therefore come as no surprise that I, like so many across our great State, believe it is necessary to address large-scale lethal management of animals whenever and wherever it occurs.

There are amazing examples of local communities in Colorado leading the way, like Lafayette, recently recognized by Environment for the Americas for educating citizens about the importance of conserving birds at a time when America has seen a 30% decline in populations since the 1970s. Lafayette provides a great example of the kind of forward-thinking approach to urban wildlife management that we should embrace, but there is plenty of room for improvement.

In 2019, the City and County of Denver rounded-up and culled ~1,600 Canada Geese across a number of its municipal parks. Despite a yearlong campaign by Denver voters to appeal this decision, Denver Parks and Recreation continued its program this year, killing ~500 more Canada Geese in the month of July.

Needless to say, I do not support this strategy, and I have spent the last year consulting respected wildlife biologists who assure me that year-to-year culling of urban wildlife is costly to taxpayers, scientifically ineffective as a long-term solution, and woefully inhumane.

For these reasons, I have been encouraging City of Denver officials to identify and implement better alternatives to manage its Canada Geese.

Last Monday, I met with Denver officials and wildlife biologists to continue this important dialogue. I sincerely hope that by connecting Denver with well-qualified scientific experts, decision-makers will be persuaded to adopt a different approach. I believe these alternative strategies should not include rounding-up and killing Denver's Canada Geese. [Note: I also was at this thoroughly unproductive meeting.]

Ultimately, the decision of how best to manage its urban wildlife rests with City of Denver officials, but I strongly encourage Denver and every city in our great State to exhaust all non-lethal options before ever considering killing animals.

[City and County of Denver Government](#), [City of Lafayette Colorado Government](#), [Canada Geese Protection Colorado](#), [In Defense of Animals](#), [United Poultry Concerns](#)

Bekoff, Marc. [The Family Life of Birds](#).

_____. [For the Birds: From Exploitation to Liberation](#). (A new book by UPC's Dr. Karen Davis focuses on chickens, turkeys, and other domestic fowl.)

Kessler Ellen. [A second year \(2020\) of slaughtering Canada Geese has just concluded](#).

[United Poultry Concerns. Protect Denver's Canada Geese: Take Action!](#)

_____. [Canada Geese Massacre in Denver, CO: Correspondence & Update](#).

[The First Gentleman Of Colorado Is Against Geese Culling In Denver](#). CBS News, Denver, July 24.

[Culling Canada Geese: First Gentleman Marlon Reis Asks Denver To 'Exhaust All Non-Lethal Options'](#), CBS News, Denver, July 24.