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Taxpayers subsidizing wild life extermination program, probe shows

By MARY LOU SIMMS
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The trucks pulled up at dawn. PollyAnna, a year-old disabled goose whose wing feathers were growing back, was asleep when the trappers approached.

Not long after, Debbie Dangerfield, a real estate agent and 16-year resident of River's Edge, a sprawling residential complex in Charleston, S.C., was leaving her condo to check on PollyAnna when she noticed she was missing. Also gone were a dozen or so geese parents and their young.

The crippled geese also seemed to have vanished: Nibbles, a young gander with a damaged wing; Limp, so-named because of an upper-leg injury, and VeeVee, the victim of fishing-line entrapment.

As Dangerfield approached the entrance to the complex, she noticed two USDA trucks pulling away from the guard house and broke into a dead run, reaching the vehicles as they slowed to accommodate speed bumps. She begged the drivers to pull over, peering inside one of the trucks as they did.

There she saw PollyAnna crammed into a crate with half a dozen other geese.

"The geese were frantic," Dangerfield recalls. "They had been shoved into crates, stacked like pancakes, defecating on each other. I was begging and pleading for them to at least let me have the few crippled geese we had rescued."

Eventually the police came and the River's Edge management agreed to let her keep one bird.

"They were just trying to appease me," she says, "to keep me quiet so other residents wouldn't hear the commotion and decide to investigate." PollyAnna now shares the backyard of a rehabilitation center with a crippled goose named Angel, occasionally serving as a good-will ambassador for her species.

The story is one of many. In Delafield, Wis., lifelong resident Jim Pfeil tried to keep the feds from gassing an aging crippled goose named Stumpy this summer, offering to match the \$6,500 slaughter fee if city officials would allow an animal protection group to manage the geese instead.

A few years ago, Pfeil rushed Stumpy to a wildlife center where veterinarians removed a bullet through the neck. Recently, he watched in tears as workers crowded Stumpy into a crate with her mate and four or five other geese. "I almost wish I hadn't seen it, it was so awful," he says. "But I feel compelled to tell her story." He says the roundup lasted four hours, from 8 a.m. to noon, and that some of the geese seemed already dead by the time they were trucked to an undisclosed location. Mayor Ed McAleer declined to discuss the event but says the meat was sent to a food pantry.

And in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, residents set up a vigilante-style "goose watch" to protect a trio of newborns dubbed "the miracle birds," hatched when volunteers treating eggs (a form of birth control), missed a nest.

Wildlife Services is the little-known branch of the USDA deemed largely responsible for geese slaughters coast to coast. Buried under several layers of bureaucracy, Wildlife Services prefers to stay under the radar.

However, a copy of a 2010 report obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request indicates that U.S. taxpayers are subsidizing a \$126.5 million program that exterminates more than 4 million wild animals annually, including thousands of geese.

The agency also has come under fire for its use of sodium cyanide, a poison placed in devices called M-44's, which its literature says is used to control coyotes, wild dogs and foxes preying on livestock.

"Many animals killed by M-44's are non-targeted species such as raccoons, bears and household pets," says Brooks Fahy of Predator Defense, a national conservation group, who condemned the agency's use of poisons on a CNN HLN Jane Velez-Mitchell show in March.

"There are years of outmoded thinking," he says, "and leaders from an old regime that can't seem to transition to newer, more humane ways of managing wildlife."

Carol Bannerman, a Wildlife Services media specialist, declined to respond.

Wildlife Services is charged with overseeing the nation's wildlife conflicts involving agricultural and property damage, and human health and safety. Geese are blamed for creating a "nuisance" by defecating on municipal lawns and golf courses.

"We understand the need to manage geese populations," says John Hadidian, suburban wildlife director of The Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection group. "It's the approach that is controversial. Capturing geese in a way that is deemed terrorizing is very disturbing to people."

Geese are rounded up and gassed during the summer molt, from late June through early August - unable to escape as new flight feathers replace worn.

According to its literature, however, the agency's mission "is to resolve conflicts in a manner that allows people and wildlife to coexist peacefully."

Dangerfield, remembering PollyAnna's narrow escape, would like to know how that works. So might those who witnessed the deaths of long-time community geese in lethal roundups that left residents in tears. "The human distress was almost equal to that of the geese," remembers Hadidian, of a slaughter in Olney, Md.

In its literature, Wildlife Services tells the public that it euthanizes geese humanely, following guidelines of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

However, videos, photos and eye-witness accounts tell a different story.

Videos show trappers grabbing geese by the throats, handling them roughly, throwing them into crates, parents trampling their young in the process.

"They jam them into those gas chambers until they can't get another feather inside," says Betty Butler, a researcher from Monmouth, N.J. "You can hear the geese thrashing and thumping trying to escape."

Wildlife Services has police cordon off areas where the geese will be executed, she adds, to keep the public from interfering.

Such actions have prompted a growing divide over how geese populations should be managed.

Increasingly, communities are advocating a humane approach. Some communities want to keep their geese but curb population growth by (humanely) treating nest eggs with corn oil. Others hire companies to clean up after the geese if feces is an issue, or as in Ballwin, Mo. or Helena, Ala., incorporate its removal into daily park maintenance. Others want the geese gone but without harming them.

Several communities have organized grassroots efforts to keep the feds at bay.

-In Jackson, Miss., 200 geese were scheduled for removal at the nearby 33,000-acre Ross Barnett Reservoir, when Justin Fritscher, a reporter for The Clarion-Ledger, decided to find out where the geese were being shipped. "The local governing body of the reservoir discussed having them removed at one of its meetings," he said. "I took that to mean moved somewhere else ..." However, when he called the USDA, he learned that the geese weren't being trucked to a paradise in the wilds of central Mississippi, they were being gassed. When the story broke, residents voiced such outrage that the proposed kill and another planned in a nearby suburb of Brandon were both canceled.

-In Bergen County, N.J., Freeholders, the legislative body that advises the county executive, passed a resolution banning slaughters at county parks after a protest. "When residents brought the actions to our attention," says Freeholders chairperson Jim Carroll, "we told the parks department to 'cease and desist'"

-In Brooklyn, N.Y., residents formed a task force, For the Love of Geese in Prospect Park, to protect new geese that began arriving after Wildlife Services killed some 350 geese and goslings. "Parishioners in my neighborhood were visibly upset," recalls Monsignor Keirnan Harrington of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. "We were stunned," says Mary Beth Artz of Brooklyn, one of the group's organizers. "We're a tight-knit community and the geese were part of that." The feds had initially slaughtered geese at locations within a seven-mile kill zone of JFK and LaGuardia airports in response to the USAir-geese collision the year before. "But Prospect Park falls outside the kill zone," recalls Artz. "So we thought our geese were safe."

-In Bend, Ore., where 109 geese were slain last summer, gift shop owner Forest Fell organized a successful grassroots effort to prevent future slaughters at Drake Park. "We don't want to be known as a community that kills its wildlife," he says.

-In Mount Laurel, N.J., an informal group was organized after Wildlife Services slaughtered geese at Laurel Acres Park. "There was no reason to kill them," says Sharon Pawlak of Medford. "Now the town has hired a border collie company but 133 geese are dead."

Wildlife Services, however, doesn't act alone.

"Someone has to request assistance," says media specialist Gail Keirn from its Colorado office. "We just don't go in and start killing on our own."

Slaughters are usually initiated by public officials or others in authority, says Pawlak, who has negotiated geese conflicts in New Jersey.

Then comes the uproar, she adds.

"Officials are embarrassed when residents want to know what happened to their geese," she says. "It didn't dawn on them when they contracted with the USDA that it might be controversial."

River's Edge, the setting for PollyAnna's ordeal, is an example of how slaughters come to be.

In mid-week, the management of the residential complex posted a notice for an emergency meeting to discuss the geese. The complex has almost 500 registered owners.

"I knew they meant business," Dangerfield recalls. "But there were so few people at the meeting it couldn't be construed as representative of all of the tenants."

Participants voted to kill the geese, 14 to 7. Two days later, the feds came.

The River's Edge management declined to discuss the slaughter.

However, Carol Bannerman of Wildlife Services' national office emailed that "the manager had not given permission for release (of the crippled birds) on the property."

Wildlife rehabilitator Beth Mowder insists that she informed the management several times that she would remove the crippled geese if there was ever a problem.

"These were geese that posed no harm to anyone but needed a quiet environment where they could live out their lives," she says.

In its literature, Wildlife Services recommends an integrated approach to managing geese, citing "community involvement as an important part of a decision (to euthanize)."

However, officials in some communities say they don't recall non-lethal measures having been an option.

-In Jackson, Miss., John Sigman, executive director of the Pearl River Water Supply District, says he was misled from the start. "When we first talked to the USDA, we didn't fully understand the direction they were taking us," he says. "I assumed, wrongfully, that the geese were being relocated." However, Patrick Smith, a supervisor in its Stoneville office, says he "never used any term other than euthanasia in addressing reservoir officials." When Sigman found out that the geese were being gassed, he says, he asked if they could be relocated instead. "They agreed," he says, "telling us we would have to pay mileage and other fees to which we agreed." A few days later, he says, the feds reneged on that agreement. Smith says the reservoir has since rebuffed efforts to introduce humane efforts. Asked why those efforts weren't initially offered, he was silent.

-In Delavan Lake, Wis., township manager Dorothy Burwell says she authorized the slaughter of 100 geese after a Wildlife Services presentation convinced her that "killing was the way to go." Now she has teamed up with the Lakeland Animal Shelter to humanely oversee the new geese that have since arrived. "The problems don't seem insurmountable," says shelter executive director Kristen Perry, who organized a volunteer corps that will clean up after the geese through Labor Day.

-At Lake Harbison, S.C., near Columbia, humane measures were never brought up, says Sid Crumpton of the Harbison Community Association. As a result, some 200 geese were killed in one of the state's most controversial slaughters. Today a humane program is in place to oversee 75 new geese. "We're trying to do the right thing," he says.

A follow-up of communities where geese were killed also suggests that such actions are ineffective.

"Slaughters don't work because geese pond-hop," says Denise Savageau, town conservation director in Greenwich, Conn. "As soon as a location becomes vacant, new geese move in."

In Sayreville, N.J., however, borough council member Lisa Eicher wasn't able to convince other officials to vote against gassing geese.

"We've spent about \$60,000 in the last five years," she says, "and still the geese keep coming. Isn't it time we tried something else?"

Wildlife Services also says in its literature, that geese pose "a serious health threat." However, geese present no more of a health risk than any other species, including cats and dogs, says Dr. Julia Murphy, public health veterinarian for the Virginia Department of Health.

"Certainly there's a possibility of pathogens (disease-causing bacteria) in fecal material but as a particular risk factor in and of itself, there simply is no direct link," says Murphy.

You would have to ingest droppings to experience discomfort (such as mild gastro-intestinal cramps or upset stomach), she adds, recommending routine hygiene washing hands or keeping close tabs on youngsters too young to tell feces from dirt as protective measures.

Waterfowl specialist Tim Ford, vice president of research at The University of New England, says he knows of no studies linking Canada geese to human health problems.

"The science just isn't there to support that reasoning," he says.

Documents obtained through a Freedom of Information request also indicate that the agency profits from its outside contracts.

In 2010, the agency earned almost \$70 million almost 60 percent of its overall budget in part from contracts such as those at Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

(Its reports show that Wildlife Services also kills millions of coyotes, blue herons, wolves, beavers, starlings, and other species through trapping, poison and aerial gunning.)

The agency denied a Freedom of Information request to disclose the amount of revenue from gassing geese last year, saying it does not keep such records.

However a review of 15 locations indicates that geese slaughters range from \$6,500 in Delafield to \$347,000 for a three-year geese management contract in Union County, N.J.

Nor would the agency disclose the amount of its 2010 joint contract with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the city of New York for removal of hundreds of city geese, including those at Prospect Park. However a Freedom of Information request indicates that Wildlife Services was paid \$100,000.

Slaughters are also quick and easy; humane programs take longer.

However, participants stand by the results.

Jan Herbert, who runs a geese management program for the parks department in Rockford, Ill., estimates that she and her staff have oiled about 18,000 nest eggs along a seven-mile stretch of the Rock River, reducing the overall geese population to fewer than 300, down from some 1,200 geese.

Similar successes have been achieved in Seattle, Detroit and St. Louis, where volunteers are now oiling thousands of eggs every spring.

In Seattle, for example, where thousands of geese were executed a decade ago, slaughters are now almost non-existent.

"Wildlife Services is still lurking in the background," says Hadidian, "but generally the geese in Seattle are safe."

The Obama administration is proposing a \$10 million budget cut for the USDA's Wildlife Services. Critics, including Camilla H. Fox, wildlife consultant of the Animal Welfare Institute, say reductions should be deeper, and funding for gassing geese and its use of poisons cut altogether.

"The program fosters a dependence on taxpayer-funded assistance instead of promoting effective long-term solutions," says Fox.

Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the HSUS, says he would like to see Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack turn Wildlife Services into a humane agency.

"We need a federal agency to help resolve wildlife conflicts humanely," he says. "Not an agency that is basically a contract killer for the states ..."

William Clay, who runs Wildlife Services, did not respond to requests to discuss the agency's direction.

Meanwhile, a growing number of communities continue to leave the feds out of the equation, following principles of the HSUS and GeesePeace, the nation's leaders in implementing humane measures at little or no cost.

GeesePeace director David Feld is currently working with the entire state of Rhode Island.

"Not everyone will participate," he says, "but we'll make our mark."

And Hot Springs Village, Ark., near Little Rock, the nation's largest gated community, remains a honkers' paradise.

"Word got out in the spring that we had discussed killing some 600 geese and there was total uproar," says Steve White, director of planning, who is now partnering with the HSUS.

"What is needed is a new paradigm ..." says wildlife consultant Fox. "If the money and efforts used to kill ... were redirected toward cost-effective, non-lethal methods, such as public education and better landscape development, conflicts would be significantly reduced."

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Wildlife Services web site: <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife-damage/index.shtml>