This California city is trying a little birth control to keep geese in check
14 April 2022, by Grace Hase

They strut through grassy knolls, preen their feathers and bathe in Central Park's water fountain, all while leaving behind piles of poop—some 176 pounds' worth a day, to be exact.

And no matter what Santa Clara has tried to do to fend off the hundreds of Canada geese that habitually invade the sprawling park's lake area, nothing seems to work.

The city has blared panicked geese noises and set up coyote decoys, all to no avail, according to Parks Director James Teixeira. "The geese have become accustomed to that almost immediately," he explained.

And although there's a business that unleashes dogs to scatter the geese, city officials have eschewed that practice as "cruel" and just a "temporary deterrent." At wit's end, the city now plans to control the federally protected fowl by employing a form of birth control known as egg addling.

Santa Clara isn't the only Bay Area city battling gaggles of geese that gross out park workers stuck with cleaning up their mess. Foster City, Fremont, Sunnyvale, Mountain View, Oakland and Cupertino—cities blessed with natural or artificial waterways—have at various times found themselves as flummoxed as Santa Clara.

While some of these non-native Canada geese flock south for the winter, others have taken up full-time residency in the region and other parts of Northern California.

Bird watchers say their numbers have been increasing as much as 30% a year in the South Bay since the late 1980s, according to avian expert William Bousman's Breeding Bird Atlas of Santa Clara County.

As the geese continue to populate Santa Clara, park officials worry about potential public hazards, such as the spread of avian diseases, "goose-visitor confrontations," a lack of biodiversity and, of course, rampant droppings.

According to a recent goose management plan drafted by the city, the 176 pounds of feces the geese drop at the park each day equate to about 5,280 pounds a month, or 63,360 pounds a year.

The egg-addling weapon Santa Clara now wants to employ to tackle the problem involves draining the lake's geese-drawing fountain, planting dense sections of tall shrubbery where they can gather and removing the birds' eggs from nests there.

The eggs can then either be coated with corn oil, punctured with a needle or shaken vigorously to kill the embryos. After that, they're returned to the nest.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has issued a permit to addle the goose eggs, according to the city.

Matthew Dodder, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, said while it may

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seem "a bit draconian at first," egg addling is one of the more humane ways to control the geese population, better than euthanizing or capturing and redistributing them.

Just removing the eggs from nests doesn't work because the geese would lay more eggs.

"If you addle them and put them back into the nest, then the adults don't realize that the eggs are dormant and they will continue to incubate them and nothing will happen," Dodder said. "That's proven to be the only effective way of bringing down the numbers, but of course, you need to do that every year."

Other entities like the city of Cupertino, East Bay Regional Park District and the Santa Clara County Department of Parks and Recreation have found egg addling to be effective.

Santa Clara County Parks spokesperson Tamara Clark said they try to limit egg addling, "but due to no natural predators in the area, an unchecked population of geese pushes out other native wildlife."

The abundance of bird droppings, which particularly has been a problem at Vasona Lake in Los Gatos and Los Gatos Creek, is also a safety and health concern for the county.

If the egg addling fails, all isn't lost. Options are out there, although Santa Clara has waved off the one involving geese-chasing dogs.

But other cities haven't, and that's where Denise Laberee and Vicki Stewart's San Lorenzo-based business—4 Paws Goose Control—comes in.

Their herd of canines, mostly border collies with names like Sweep, Shelby and Streak, have been chasing geese away from golf courses, parks, schools and cemeteries across the Bay Area over the past decade.

Laberee and Stewart sometimes use drones or lasers to complement the dogs' efforts.

"In the beginning, when we go to a location they will try flying and landing and flying and landing," Laberee said. "But places that we go regularly, they know just go, 'The dogs are here; we're out of here,' and they take off. Sometimes we just drive up and they leave."

"It's kind of like having an insurance policy," she added.

If geese-chasing dogs or egg addling don't work, there's always inflatable air dancers like those seen waving in the wind at car dealerships. Bay Area Rapid Transit officials used the brightly colored dancers back in 2012 to scare off geese and other birds that were trying to nest in the path of construction for the Warm Springs and San Jose extensions.

While cities continue seeking solutions to the fowl problem, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society's Dodder believes people should celebrate birds—be they geese or crows.

"We try to embrace them instead of bemoan them," he said.