

# A war of attrition

*Shooing geese from prime real estate takes persistence, boats, and very fast dogs*



PHOTOS BY ROBERT BREESE

By Becca Tucker

**"E**ach Canada Goose defecates once every seven minutes. Think about that. Cheese doodle-sized turds. It is an eating, defecating machine."

"And it's *Canada* Goose. Not Canadian."

Pete Rizzo, owner of Hudson Valley Wild Goose Chasers, knows his enemy.

At 8 a.m. on a spring morning, Rizzo opens the crate in back of his truck and says "Jim." At the sound of his name, out jumps a slim Border Collie trembling with anticipation. Rizzo walks Jim on a lead toward 20 geese munching grass and scuffling over mates on the lawn outside the Bear Mountain Inn, then slips the leash off Jim's head so he's free.

Jim stalks toward the birds in a low crouch, tail between back legs, fixing them with the intense gaze of a predator. The geese honk and shuffle the other direction. Jim flies into a sprint, and the panicked birds take off flapping and running until they're airborne.

Rizzo whistles a long blast through the shepherd's whistle around his neck, and Jim starts coming in. He gets sidetracked by goose poop for a minute. Jim is only 18 months old and still in training. He jumps up to greet everyone in our party, and Rizzo gives him a pat. "That'll do Jim," he says. "Lie down."

Geese take sanctuary in water, and Rizzo knew before they flew that they would head for Hessian Lake. "Every time those geese go from that lawn to that lake, they have to be cleared off that lake, to tell 'em they have to clear the

property completely," he said.

We jump in Rizzo's truck and drive down to the dock, which is deserted because it's March and cold. Rizzo rights his vessel, a silver outboard with an electric trolling motor and an orange stripe that reads Goose Control. Yesterday was Jim's first time in a boat, and he wouldn't stand up. Today he stands, skittishly. By the end of the season, Rizzo expects him to be peering over the bow like a ship's figurehead, locating geese.

By the time Rizzo and Jim have motored over to the far end of the lake, the geese have taken off again.

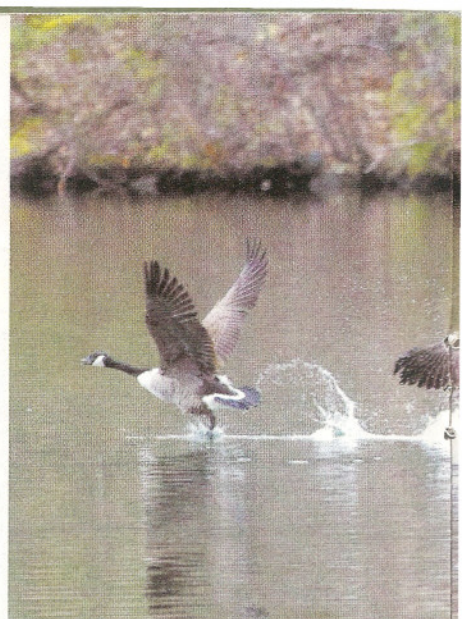
Danny Childress, an engineer at Bear Mountain State Park for 23 years, watches Rizzo motor back to the dock and shakes his head. "As soon as they leave, if you wait around here, they'll go down by the river, and then they'll make their way back," he said. "It's too much work. The geese, they come back, no matter what."

When they do come back, Rizzo will be there with one of his dogs to chase them away again. That might mean coming back three times a day, seven days a week. Rizzo has to be relentless.

This is more than a job to Rizzo, who wrote an impassioned 22-page essay in his bid for the Bear Mountain State Park job. (New York State hired him, but only because his price was the lowest. He doesn't think they read the essay.) He calls what he does "a war of attrition."

"The question is: Who will outlast the other?"

Before Rizzo started here last year, the park was home to about 80 resident geese, according to Park Manager Dave Bourne. "Their







droppings were everywhere – playgrounds, walkways,” Bourne said. Last year, Rizzo cut the population to between four and six geese. That’s between four and six geese more than Rizzo would like, but here’s the rub: Once the birds lose their flight feathers in mid-summer and settle down to raise their young, they can’t be moved. “If you walk in there and there’s a pair with goslings? You’ve lost. There’s nothing you can do.”

**I** admire them. I think they’re a beautiful bird. They’re doing what they do naturally. When they take off, fly in Vs, it’s a treasure we have,” said Rizzo. A long time dog trainer, hunter and fisherman, Rizzo respects wildlife. “They’re just stuck in a conundrum, really.”

It’s a conundrum of human engineering. Hard as it is to imagine, the Canada Goose was revered by early naturalists. After the birds were hunted nearly to extinction, state and federal wildlife agencies began raising them in captivity and releasing them in the 1960s. The geese found our suburban golf courses, parks and athletic fields to be prime habitat, so much so that many have adopted a non-migratory lifestyle. “Canada Geese are a golf course’s

nightmare,” said Rizzo, whose dogs are trained to ride in a golf cart. “The amount of money they spend to maintain these grounds, and the amount of time it can be destroyed, is nuts.”

The Canada Goose population more than doubled between 1989 and 2006, according to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. With numbers at an all-time high, the once beloved harbinger of the changing seasons has come to be thought of as a pest.

As for what to do about them, everyone’s got a different opinion. Screaming fights erupted in Mamaroneck this spring over the town’s plan to have the United States Department of Agriculture round up and kill geese and give the meat to food banks. Instead, they will be coating goose eggs in corn oil to render them infertile. An Iowa City is fining people for feeding geese; an Ontario town will try luring geese into a bird sanctuary with corn. You can buy windmills, lasers, flashing lights, speakers that make predator calls, decoys, pyrotechnics, toy boats and goose repellents made from non-toxic grape extract. But more and more, people with goose problems are turning to Border Collies.

Of course, plenty of people object to hazing geese with dogs,

too. It’s not unusual for Rizzo to be accosted while he’s working. “This place is for the geese,” a dog walker told him recently. “You don’t get it.” Rizzo will engage up to a point – explaining that the feces can carry *ecoli*, that kids play on these fields – but if it gets heated, he leaves the fight to the people who’ve hired him.

Rizzo grudgingly uses a few bells and whistles like pyrotechnics, decoys and radio-controlled toy boats for when the water’s too cold for the dogs to swim. But pyrotechnics scare people, toys break and geese get wise to decoys. Nothing, he says, works like a well trained dog.

Behind Rizzo’s house in northern Rockland County is a dog kennel and a corral made of netting. This is where he trains his Collies to obey five commands, each of which has a corresponding whistle: “Lie down” means stop; “that’ll do” is the recall; “come by” means go left; “away” means go right; and “walk up” means walk up slowly.

He places two plastic geese inside the corral – usually he also puts a domestic duck in there, to add to the effect, but the duck is not on hand today. Border Collies are natural sheep dogs; training them to ignore everything but geese takes time.

Rizzo is training two new dogs this spring because he lost his favorite dog to a blood disorder. “Both of these dogs, their stop is a big question mark. You can’t have that.” Working in tight spaces near roads, he has to be able to control his dogs’ every move, even from across a pond.

The first time I went out with Rizzo, Jim spotted some deer and took off after them, returning 15 minutes later with a bloody muzzle. To discipline him, Rizzo “humiliated” Jim by picking him up and carrying him back to the car. Jim is the more willful of his two dogs, but Rizzo prefers working with him because of the power of his gaze. “That male really puts a scare into whatever he works,” said Rizzo. “Jim has a bigger presence. He’s going to put more fear into these birds.”

That’s important, because a couple hours after Rizzo and Jim chased geese off Hessian Lake, eight geese are landing in another grassy area within the park. Jim gives chase, and away the geese fly.

“We’re going to have a fight before the molt comes,” said Rizzo. “They’re going to want to stay here to lose their feathers. If you work ‘em now and really put the fear into ‘em, this is when you make your money.”

