

Amenities & Leisure Committee Meeting – 6th March 2024

Agenda Item 5.1 – CANADA GEESE - MELNR

Background

1. In July 2023 the Secretary of MERA wrote to ETC's Senior Park Ranger stating that they had received "a number of complaints about the Canada Geese.....They tour Lakeside, Allendale Road, Andrews Road and even the roads on the opposite side of Silverdale Road. Our latest complaint emanated from Lancaster Gardens." He stated that whilst many people enjoy watching the geese and their babies, some people were annoyed by the mess they leave behind them on pavements and in front gardens. The Secretary went on to ask if the Town Council would consider "destroying" some of the eggs "to limit the number of hatchlings in any one year", adding that he believed ETC had done this in the past.
2. ETC's Senior Park Ranger's response to MERA stated that, in the past, Council had decided that dipping the eggs of these wild birds was not acceptable on a Nature Reserve and he would be surprised if they reinstated the practice. He added that "most of the residents seem to delight in the birds. The only solution I can think of is for those residents that are concerned, that they erect some temporary fencing around their lawn during the breeding season."
3. The Town Clerk also responded concurring with the Senior Park Ranger's view and suggested there were simple measures residents could take to deter these wild birds from visiting their front gardens. She added that many people enjoy seeing the geese, especially when they are raising their families, and feel the presence of such creatures enriches residents' lives. The Secretary was informed that about 20 years ago the town council did take measures to reduce the number of eggs that hatched but that is not something we would do today. Earley Town Council works to increase biodiversity, support the natural world and reduce our impact on the climate, as well as taking measures to encourage residents to support the natural world.

The Town Clerk is not aware of any complaints made to ETC about the Canada Geese and their natural behaviours, in fact we have only received positive comments from residents. MERA was asked exactly how many complaints it was referring to but that information has not been provided.

4. In January 2024, ETC received a response from the Secretary of MERA. He stated that they "understand that the geese are protected wild birds and that the council is choosing not to apply for a licence from Natural England to reduce the number of hatchlings." He added that MERA could "advise residents on measures to protect their front gardens from the geese, but we are very concerned about the health risks to children, who play outside on the pavements in Lakeside and on the other quieter roads in the area. Would the council be prepared to agree to clean up the paths at least once a week during the late spring and summer months to ensure that the trail of droppings is cleaned up on a regular basis?"

Action taken

In order to assist town councillors make an informed decision on what, if any, actions it should take to address MERA's concerns, the Town Clerk arranged for a local resident, who for several years has been studying the Canada Geese visiting Earley, to present an informative session to councillors and officers. This was held on 20th February, eight town councillors attended along with three officers.

The presentation was fact based and was extremely interesting and informative. It gave details on a year in the life of Canada Geese visiting Earley, typical behaviours, food preferences and information on factors that impact breeding figures. Points that are especially relevant to Maiden Erlegh Lake and Nature Reserve include:

- Our lake is one of a group of local lakes that the geese travel between during their time in the area.
- The majority of Canada Geese are day visitors and do not leave the lake/nature reserve until they fly to their 'home' elsewhere at the end of each day.
- A small number of the geese present in the wider area make their nests and raise their families at MELNR. These are the geese that may leave the Nature Reserve during the day, on foot because the goslings are unable to fly. In recent years there have been between 8 and 10 families breeding at the reserve.
- Canada Geese operate a creche system so an adult pair may, for a period of time, have more than their own goslings under their care. The biggest creche seen here comprised of 2 adults and 27 goslings photographed swimming on our lake.
- There are several factors which may lead a family to leave the nature reserve during the day including the search for food for the youngsters and the behaviour of predators on the lake.
- The behaviour of resident swans at MELNR has a major impact on goose behaviour, especially when the swans have young of their own. Until a couple of years ago MELNR's resident swan was a lone male who had lost his mate. Even though he had no young, his natural instinct was to attack goslings, killing them or drowning them. This reduced the number of goslings that survived. In 2023 that swan was replaced by a new pair of swans who had decided to make MELNR their home (the lake supports only one swan pair at a time, each pair will remain for approximately 5 years). The new swans had a different approach to protecting their interests, they attack the adult geese, chasing them from the lake and surrounding area. This meant that in 2023 more goslings survived but more of them spent time during the day further away from the lake, away from the aggressive swans.
- The geese and goslings eat short, fresh grass and will walk to local streets to find it (between about mid-May and July). They will not eat grass that has grown beyond about an inch in height. Geese will also not go over barriers of about 8 inches in height, hence their preference for open plan front gardens and grass verges.
- Availability of such grass is affected by the weather as well as by the actions of local residents. The introduction of hard landscaping at the front of properties results in less grass being available and the geese having to travel further to find food. Vehicles parked on grass verges also damage grass growth.
- Residents can deter geese from going on to their front gardens by leaving their grass to grow slightly longer or by erecting a low, deterrent 'fence' during the period the goslings are foraging for food.

A Policy for Earley Town Council

At the information session on 20th February, it was agreed that it would be useful for ETC to have a policy on these wild birds in order that should any residents complain about their behaviour outside of the Nature Reserve officers can provide a timely response. The members of the Amenities & Leisure Committee are asked to help draft such a policy, to be presented to Full Council for adoption later in March. Attendees at the session were asked to put forward suggestions for points to be considered as part of this policy, a range of those suggestions are included here:

- ☐ All birds at Maiden Erlegh Lake & Nature Reserve are wild birds and as such are protected in law.
- ☐ Recognition that MELNR is a registered nature reserve and wild birds are an important part of a healthy nature reserve. The number of geese that choose to use the Nature Reserve should be celebrated as a success not seen as a problem.
- ☐ Residents who wish to submit complaints about the inhabitants of the Nature Reserve or anything connected to the Nature Reserve should be directed to contact the Town Council directly rather than go through a third party, for example a residents' association. This would enable the Town Council to compile verifiable data about any impacts on residents and would assist us in future management plans.
- ☐ Expert advice should be sought on how ETC manages MELNR in relation to the provision of suitable nesting sites; ways to encourage a variety of wild birds to use MELNR; ways in which ETC can maximise the amount of on-site 'food' available to wild birds.
- ☐ Take action to reduce the number of suitable nesting sites available to Canada Geese at MELNR.

- ☐ Consider ways in which wildlife can be encouraged to stay within the Nature Reserve rather than venture beyond it.
- ☐ Work towards encouraging 'less aggressive' birds rather than Canada Geese.
- ☐ Provide education to residents, informing them of measures they can take to deter the geese from their own front garden should they not want them visiting there.
- ☐ Ban parking on grass verges and encourage verge restoration to provide geese with accessible roadside grazing that isn't on private property.
- ☐ Road sign warnings about potential 'geese crossing' during the few months the goslings may be out and about.
- ☐ To protect the geese, request 20mph zones in roads that they use.
- ☐ Introduce a bylaw to give protection to geese in local roads.

To note

Some of the above comments may contradict each other, this illustrates the range of approaches suggested.

There are many factors affecting which wild birds and how many of each species visit the lake in any given year. Many of these factors are outside of ETC's control, for example, impact of bird flu on particular populations, weather impacts, changes in wider population numbers.

It is not always possible to take actions which will affect only one species of wild birds. Reducing the number of nesting sites suitable for Canada Geese will also reduce the number of sites available for other species who look for the same qualities in a nesting site.

MELNR has been managed successfully as a nature reserve by ETC officers for over 20 years. The focus has always been on improving biodiversity and providing the best possible conditions for a multitude of varieties of trees, plants, insects, invertebrates, birds, animals and so on. Between us, the officers have a huge wealth of experience and knowledge and, for many years have worked in collaboration with others in the community who similarly possess knowledge and experience. ETC officers are also experienced in seeking expert help and advice when specialist knowledge is required.

Any policy on Canada Geese at MELNR should focus on this issue and is not to be seen as a rewriting of any nature reserve management plan or scheme already in place.

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Agenda Item 11 – CORONATION TREE & PLAQUE

Councillor Caroline Smith, Town Mayor, and the Coronation Tree



Plaque details

