



A young volunteer carries a goose to DEC biologists for tagging.

# Goose Drive!



Rounding up passels of ornery Canada geese with canoes and kayaks, volunteers take to the water each summer at Wilson Hill Wildlife Management Area for a rollicking day of bird banding and camaraderie.

Photographer Jim Clayton and I arrive at Wilson Hill Wildlife Management Area on the St. Lawrence River in northern New York on a sunny, mild, late-June evening. The sweet smell of barbecuing chicken greets us as we get out of the car. Several people are enjoying a picnic dinner and friendly conversation. It's the day before the "goose drive" and everyone is anticipating herding little "gooseys" tomorrow morning.

The Wilson Hill Goose Drive has been bringing geese and people together in the name of waterfowl conservation since 1974. Each year, the drive takes place in late June, when Canada geese molt, shedding their flight feathers and growing new ones. At this time, the birds can't fly, so biologists take advantage of this fact to round up, examine and band the geese in large numbers.

Moms, dads, grandmas, grandpas and kids from toddlers to teens (139 strong) have come to volunteer. A campfire is crackling and a few tents are pitched on the lawn nearby. Goose drive veterans are catching up with each other, while first-timers like me listen intently to tales of roundups gone by.

After eating our fill, we confirm last-minute details with Principal Wildlife Technician Blanche Town. Blanche coordinates the drive from the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC's) Potsdam office with assistance from staff in nearby Watertown. Loose ends tied up, we say goodbye and leave for

Massena, where we'll spend the night. As we drive off, a strong westerly breeze pushes ominous clouds toward us and the horizon glows fiery orange.

After a night of booming thunderstorms, the day of the drive dawns much cooler. Yesterday's blue sky hides behind a ceiling of gray. "At least it's not raining...yet," I think to myself as we set out. Arriving back at Wilson Hill, we join several other sleepy volunteers who stumble over to grab coffee and doughnuts put out by Irene Mazzocchi, wildlife biologist and living proof that perpetual motion is more than just a theory.

by John Razzano  
photos by Jim Clayton

Biologist Andy MacDuff calls everyone together before launching our small flotilla. He reviews basic water safety and reminds us to listen to instructions from the drive bosses when we're out on the water so the flocks of swimming geese stay ahead of the drive line. After his pep talk, he "dismisses the troops" and everyone climbs into vehicles for a short ride to unload the boats.

We line up a colorful collection of canoes and kayaks at the water's edge along half of the causeway. The plan is to start on the west side of a stubby peninsula, pivoting in a wide arc from

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northwest to northeast. Flocks of flightless geese, either already in the water or driven there by volunteers on the far side of the pool, will be encircled by the lead boats and driven down where the rest of the fleet waits to make the final push to the east side of the peninsula. There, DEC staff have set up a combination of netting and snow fencing to funnel the birds into a holding pen.

Everyone boards the boats, shoving off and floating a short distance from shore until the start signal is given. My kayak is midway in the line, with about a dozen boats to either side. A loud blast from an air-horn signals the start. Paddling along, I see a gull, two swallows and a tern, but no geese.

As we reach a small island about a quarter-mile from shore, the paddlers to my left continue to the other end of the pool, while those of us on the right wait for their return. While we wait, I get to know my fellow volunteers.

In one canoe, four young women from the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry tell me how they're giving up some of their summer break to help out. The college is well represented with several canoes and student volunteers getting a taste of what they might be doing someday as wildlife biologists. Another canoe holds a granddad and two grandkids. Grandpa wants to have a little adventure, while showing his two charges the beauty and wonder of nature and the importance of conserving it. A double kayak holds two women who have been coming to the drive for a few years just because it's such a fulfilling way to enjoy the outdoors. In another canoe, a mom wants her two youngsters to experience wildlife in a meaningful way.

Off in the distance, the returning boats appear. But where are the geese? As the paddlers close in, three bobbing gaggles of beige, black and white come into view. Snow-white cheeks on jet-black heads



Volunteers use their boats to herd the geese toward shore where biologists use a combination of netting and snow fencing to funnel the birds into a holding pen.

reveal the distinctive markings of Canada geese. But something seems wrong. No honking! The sonorous chorus that typically announces the approach of these birds before they're even visible is eerily absent. Only an occasional high-pitched peep sounds from the flocks as they try to out-manuever the drivers. I later asked waterfowl biologists why the geese were so silent, but no one seemed to know. Perhaps the geese didn't feel threatened while out on the water, or perhaps they

didn't want to draw attention to themselves when in molt. (It's anyone's guess.)

The secret of goose herding is manipulating flock behavior, where safety in numbers is the paramount principle of survival. Unfortunately, the birds don't always cooperate. Suddenly, one group of geese breaks away from the boats and heads for shore, reaching land and disappearing into a thicket before people can cut them off. Only two groups are left to herd into the corral.

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Three rogue geese also slipped through our dragnet. The first discovered that a single bird could easily escape through the openings between the boats and simply swam to freedom. Two others escaped because their flight feathers regrew faster than their flock-mates, so when they flapped their wings as they approached the corral, their rejuvenated feathers carried them away.

The remaining geese are driven to shore and quickly waddle out of the water, where wildlife technicians herd them into a large pen, using long-handled nets as gooseherds' crooks. With the "herd" safely gathered, everyone beaches their boats, and takes a well-deserved lunch break before banding commences.

Grilled hot dogs and hamburgers and cold drinks are cheerfully served to drive volunteers courtesy of the Massena Rod and Gun Club. After everyone has eaten, goose banding begins.

The leg bands are durable but light-weight aluminum rings about one-half inch in diameter and designed not to injure the birds over the many years they are worn. Each band is inscribed with an ID number and a request for hunters to report banded birds they harvest to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates migratory bird banding. Each band has a slit for the opening and is carefully crimped with pliers around the leg of a goose.

A line forms in front of the goose pen and two wildlife technicians stand inside, ready to start handing one bird at a time to the excited volunteers. I get in line and eagerly wait my turn for a goose. The birds are gathered at the back of the pen. One technician herds a few up to the gate, careful to keep as many as he can from running back to the safety of the flock.

His partner reaches down with one hand and picks up a goose by its shoulders, quickly telling the waiting volunteer how to hold and carry a goose and whether or not it has a band. If it already has a band, the volunteer brings the bird to a table where another technician records its band number. If it does not have a band, the volunteer brings the bird to a table where technicians will place a band on one of its

legs and examine the bird, recording its age and sex.

A mixture of excitement, anxiety and pure joy are visible on the faces of the children as they ferry their geese to the tables. The littlest volunteers can't always hold on to these big birds, making for a comical scene of wildlife technicians chasing and scooping up the strays with their long-handled nets.



Technicians herd a small group of geese into the pen's gate (top photo) where they can be picked up and handed to a volunteer who carries the bird to a biologist for processing (bottom photo).

Finally, it's my turn. My goose tries to escape my grip, honking and struggling mightily to no avail. It's a rare treat to hold a wild bird and I relish the experience. A close look at this big beauty reveals why it can't fly. Instead of long flight feathers, the back of its wings are covered with pale-blue, stubby "pin" or "blood feathers." Inside these fragile structures, coursing blood feeds developing new flight feathers.

My goose doesn't have a band, so I bring it to the banding table, where a technician crimps a band securely around its leg. In order to identify the birds' gender, the technician then takes the bird, flips it over and holds it upside down on his lap with its head facing toward him between his legs. It's an uncomfortable position for the goose, which expresses its displeasure by pecking the technician's legs.

Gender identification is difficult because both male and female Canada geese have identical outward markings. Because my goose was noticeably larger than many of the others, the technician guessed and then confirmed that it was an adult male. Size can be deceiving, however, since Canada geese vary in size depending on their subspecies.

Technicians estimate the age of each goose requiring a band, recording whether it is a "hatching-year" (HY) or "after-hatching-year" (AHY) bird. An HY goose was hatched this spring, and is less than a year old, as determined by telltale features like less-pronounced cheek patches. An AHY goose is simply more than a year old. The life span of a Canada goose can run anywhere from a few to more than 20 years.

With my goose's vital statistics logged and its leg sporting a shiny new band, I carry him down to the water's edge to set him free. The instant I relax my grip, he quickly swims away, relieved to be done with his ordeal.



A biologist places a federal leg band on a goose so it can be identified in the future.

I only handle one other goose, but this one is wearing a rare \$100 reward band. The hunter that bags this bird will receive \$100 for reporting it. Reward bands range from \$25 to \$100 and are used to provide an added incentive for hunters to report banded birds. Biologists glean invaluable information about the migratory patterns and health of goose populations by matching the band numbers of recaptured geese to banding records.

In the nearly 40 years they've been doing this, DEC staff have banded more than 30,000 Canada geese. Days like today are important for DEC staff to hone their field skills. Furthermore, analysis of band returns will help biologists develop an estimate of goose populations. One of the biologists explains how important this is when making management decisions about hunting season dates and bag limits.

By late afternoon, all 277 geese had been examined and released. Of that number, 138 received new bands and 139 already had bands. The rain that had been threatening since first light finally came. A steady drizzle started falling just as we finished loading up boats and tables and climbed into our vehicles to leave. It has been a good drive and an experience I'll long remember.



The author holds a goose while a biologist attaches a leg band.

If you're looking for a unique and meaningful way to experience the outdoors in a fun, friendly, community atmosphere, try the Wilson Hill Goose Drive in late June. DEC's website [www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov) has all the details.

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