

**Take a gander: A pill to control Canada geese**  
**North Caldwell man helps develop contraceptive that could limit births**  
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New Jerseyans have captured, killed, harassed, scared and chased them. Volunteers search out their nests.

For the past couple of decades, it's been a pitched battle of humans versus Canada geese for control of golf courses, parks, corporate centers, beach areas and athletic fields statewide.

Now, there is a new, non-lethal tool in the fight to cut the Canada geese population: The pill.

A North Caldwell man and his California partner have developed a contraceptive that could limit Canada geese births. Just like in humans, Canada geese would have to take a prescribed regular daily dose of the drug and the likelihood of producing offspring would be quite low.

"I don't want to tell you this is a magical cure. But it's definitely a long-term population management tool to help deal with Canada geese," said Erick Wolf, who along with North Caldwell's Alex MacDonald, is co-partner of California-based Innolytics.

The product they are marketing is OvaControl. Its primary ingredient is a drug called Nicarbazin, first used in the 1950s to battle disease in chickens. It was effective in preventing coccidiosis, a contagious parasitic disease, in chickens, reducing their mortality from 35 percent to 1 percent. An offshoot, scientists found, was that it decreased hatchability and egg production.

That caught the attention of MacDonald and Wolf.

About a decade ago they began researching use of Nicarbazin on Canada geese. They have since gotten OvaControl registered by the federal Environmental Protection Agency for use as a pest control agent for Canada geese and feral pigeons.

MacDonald says it's easy to use. Target the flock of geese you want to control and feed them OvaControl each morning during breeding season -- late February to early April. It can be done by hand or by using an automatic feeder Innolytics developed.

"Our product looks, smells, tastes like a bread ball. We have not found a goose yet who has turned it down," MacDonald said last week at a forum at the Essex County Environmental Center. "It's a wheat-based product. Semi-soft. It's the size of Kix cereal. And it's very palatable to geese."

Geese that take "the pill" lay eggs that do not hatch.

"The egg membrane becomes more porous. It almost looks like the eggs have been shaken," said Kathleen Fagerstone, research manager for the National Wildlife Research Center of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Non-migratory Canada geese, which lay six to 12 eggs annually, need 50 grams -- or about 100 pellets -- of the feed each day, MacDonald. The estimated cost would be about \$10 to \$12 per goose per season.

For a park with a flock of 100 Canada geese, it would cost about \$1,000 to \$1,200 for the season, according to Innolytics' estimate. The program also requires a permit and must be done in coordination with a certified pest control agent, MacDonald stressed.

The USDA began studying Nicarbazin as a contraceptive in 1999, first looking at its effect on quails. The results showed it reduced hatchability of eggs, with no negative effects on other creatures that might ingest the substance, she said.

"From what we've seen in field trials, it works really well if you can get the geese to eat it," said USDA public affairs specialist Gail Keirns.

USDA researchers helped MacDonald and Wolf get the product registered for use as a pest control agent. Now, their small company is trying to drum up interest in the product.

"Everything we've heard about it sounds excellent, especially for areas where we cannot find nests or where it's too difficult to reach nests," said Del DeMaio, coordinator of Essex GeesePeace, which has sought humane methods to deal with the Canada geese problem in Essex County.

"It sounds good to me," said Nina Austenberg, director of the Mid-Atlantic regional office of the Humane Society of America. "It's sure better than netting and gassing geese."

Austenberg suggested OvaControl might be tried on a trial basis in the Morris County park system or in Morristown, where they have struggled to reduce Canada geese numbers.

MacDonald and Wolf are now working to market their product, though Wolf conceded early efforts have been "disappointing." Wolf said there has been resistance from the hunting community, which is wary of possible negative effects on the sport.

OvaControl has been used commercially in Oregon and California, with the cooperation of the USDA Fish and Wildlife Service in those states, he said.

In two targeted locations in Central Oregon -- a government park system and a commercial property -- OvaControl helped reduce the number of goslings, but with some difficulties.

"The bottom line is that where you can get geese to feed on it, the contraceptive seems to be effective. But where geese are very dispersed, especially as they spread out and nest in breeding season, it can be difficult to get to all of them and can be very labor intensive," said Mike Slater, who worked on the Oregon project for the federal agency.

In New Jersey, however, he said response has been lukewarm from the federal Interior Department's wildlife officials, who must approve permits to use OvaControl for Canada geese.

"We have bumped into a problem because the people who are being asked to deal with this are being offered something new -- a contraceptive," said Wolf. "It's not something that's been in their tool box."

"They know catching birds and euthanasia. They know addling and oiling eggs. But this is new to them. Hopefully, we'll be able to get them to open their minds on this."

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