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Goose pierced by hunting arrow lands in veterinarian's yard in Toms River

By AARON MORRISON
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A Canada goose with a hunter's 26-inch arrow sticking out of its chest picked the right place to land.

"This is a smart goose," said Bernard Levine, the retired veterinarian in whose Toms River backyard the wounded bird showed up a few weeks ago. "He happened to come into the yard of a veterinarian that could take care of him."

So Levine, 82, fed the goose, helped capture it, performed lifesaving surgery and transported it to the state's largest bird rehabilitation facility, The Raptor Trust.

All patched up after a three-week stay at The Raptor Trust, the goose was released last week into a stream in a wooded area on the trust's property with Levine witnessing the payoff for his kindness.

"It feels great to see him free and liberated, enjoying life the way a goose should," Levine said, as the goose preened and waded downstream.

Although birders generally praise Levine's efforts, some say saving geese is not an imperative because the birds have long been an overly abundant nuisance, according to Peter Bacinski, director of the Sandy Hook Bird Observatory and a New Jersey Audubon member.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists estimated the population of Canada geese in 2009 to be about 1.1 million in eastern North America from Quebec to South Carolina, an 11 percent decline from 2008 because the geese built fewer nests. Colder May temperatures in 2009 and the resulting snowmelt delayed prolonged migration to nesting grounds, the biologists concluded.

Ponds created in parks, golf courses and corporate properties have attracted geese, which pollute water and grounds with their excrement, stop traffic on roads and take over public parks, Bacinski said.

"A once regal bird has become a pimple on the rump of society," said Bacinski, a birder for 40 years.

But Raptor Trust founder Len Soucy, who self-financed the facility with his wife in the 1960s, rejects such negative opinions of geese.

"The diversity on this planet keeps us healthy," Soucy said. "To say that one goose doesn't matter, or one eagle doesn't matter, or one human being doesn't matter, I don't subscribe to that. It all matters."

Levine, working at the Toms River Animal Hospital he founded in 1955, removed 6 inches of the arrow lodged in the bird's flesh, as well as several pellets from an air rifle. Levine said he hunted ducks and geese 30 years ago but a change of heart also changed his mind about the sport.

"With the encroaching civilization and the loss of a lot of habitat, these birds are pressed for survival," Levine said. "I'd rather not shoot and kill them. I'd rather feed them and sponsor their lives."

The goose, which weighed 8 pounds after rescue, weighed 12 pounds at its last weigh-in before it

was released. Raptor Trust veterinary technician Kristi Ward said the sex and age of the bird were not determined.

New Jersey wildlife management regulations don't permit hunting waterfowl with arrows like the one removed from the goose. With proper permits, shooting geese is legal during hunting season, which doesn't open to New Jerseyans until September. The goose Levine rescued was shot out of season.

Levine, even as a hunter, was always fiercely compassionate toward animals, said his son Richard Levine, who worked as a veterinarian alongside his father for 22 years.

"He once got into a car accident to avoid running over a turtle," Richard Levine said.

Neighbors of the Levines reported seeing the injured goose as long as two weeks before it was captured. Levine first reported it to a local animal rescue outfit, which couldn't catch it. Levine happened to attend an animal rescue meeting that week, and a presenter demonstrated a net-throwing gun for capturing birds.

"Everything fell into place after that," Levine said.

His daughter, Sandy Levine, arranged for the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife to use the net gun. Soon after the surgery, a friend contacted The Raptor Trust, which rehabilitates hundreds of birds of all species each year.
