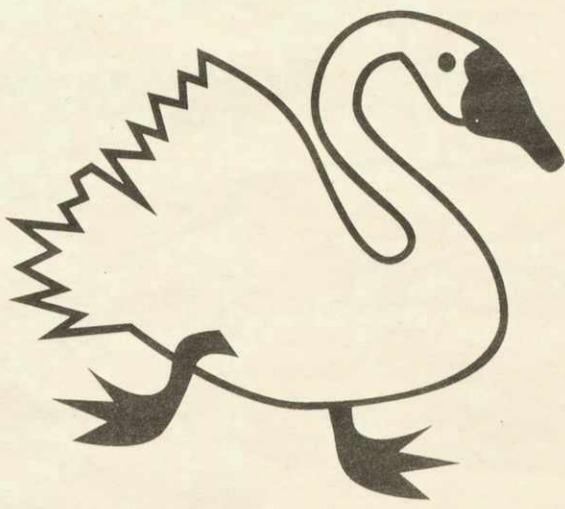


# Duck, duck, goose: a look at Memorial U's feathered friends



BY MICHAEL ROSSITER

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — Take a closer look, for the birds on Burton's Pond at Memorial University of Newfoundland are a rare and wild breed indeed.

As welcome members of the university community, the seagulls, pigeons, and, in particular, the ducks have a quiet spot away from the hustle of the campus. At one time or another, many students, employees and children enjoy a trip to the pond to feed these animals.

William Montevecchi, a professor of Biopsychology, teaches numerous animal behaviour classes at Memorial. He says Burton's Pond is a great spot to observe the wonders of nature.

"There are some incredible animals here," he said. "Some of these wild ducks probably crossed the ocean sometime and are way out of range. Even some of the gulls, that some people might be less attracted to, are rare."

But despite this diversity, it's the ducks that draw the most attention. For several years, the birds have had a great reputation among campus-goers. The pond itself is home to two distinct varieties of this animal: wild and domestic.

Montevecchi says that you can identify the wild ducks by their colours.

"The non-wild birds have a lot of white in them," he said.

In fact, he says most of the

ducks of Burton's Pond are not deliberately introduced, but came on their own. He added that the biggest mistakes for the pond were the introduced ducks.

"We periodically seem to buy these [ducks] and put them in here but I don't think we should do that at all," said Montevecchi. "What happens is the mallards, which are sort of the domesticated ones, will interbreed with these wild ducks and it is not the kind of thing we want to be encouraging. That is a potential problem, we don't want to introduce ducks here."

Montevecchi says Burton's Pond shouldn't be a place for introducing birds but for "the black ducks that are wild birds that come here on their own."

Adam Hunt is one Memorial student who likes to feed the ducks.

"I think they provide a nice diversion," said Hunt. "It's a nice sort of cross cultural thing there. You got the ducks, the pigeons, the gulls and they're all interacting nicely. The gulls are a bit ruckus, they try and steal the ducks food and the pigeons just chill out."

Hunt suggested the ducks stay there over winter because "they have all the perks of people going over and picking up a loaf of bread at the store and feeding them."

Other regular visitors to the pond include the children attending Memorial's daycare.

Tracy Hatcher, the daycare's coordinator, says the children feed them about once a week or more

depending on the season.

"It's great, the children love to do it," said Hatcher. "I think [the ducks] have come to know the children because some times in the summer they will come down from the pond and actually meet us when we come out our front door."

She says feeding the ducks is now part of their program at the daycare, becoming a family activity when some children bring in bread from their home. "I think we got everyone involved in the feeding of ducks," Hatcher said.

Hatcher says that the children usually sing songs to the ducks to call them over, but most are a little nervous when the ducks get too close.

"We did have one little girl about three years ago who had a great technique for letting them feed right from her hand," said Hatcher. "She won them over."

Simon Lono would agree. His daughter, who is in the daycare "just loves the ducks."

"My kids go mad for the ducks," said Lono. "Whenever they go out on a little field trip to feed the ducks that's all she talks about when she gets home."

Another character at Burton's Pond that is quite popular with the kids is the mysterious goose.

"My girl was really keen on the goose until she realized that it would chase her just as much as she would chase it," said Lono.

Hunt added that he doesn't know how the goose got to Burton's

Pond but says that he is like "a big bully."

"The goose is great," said Hunt. "He is like this weird entity. How did he get there — does anybody know?"

Hunt says he was also curious one day when he went to feed the ducks and discovered that the goose was missing. He immediately logged onto Memorial's news groups to find out what happened and there were a couple of people posting their concerns.

"People were wondering if the goose was alive or dead or whether it tasted good," said Hunt.

"I seriously figured he got cooked," added Lono.

Professor Montevecchi says it is great that people come and feed the birds but added that they won't survive on white bread alone.

Over the last five to ten years, Montevecchi says the population has really increased, mainly because it's such a popular place for people to come and feed them.

In addition, he says the pond is "artificial" due to a "bubbler" system underneath it meant to keep the water from freezing. The ducks will then tend to stay there over winter.

"They would [leave during winter] but like bird feeders that we have at our houses, they stay here because we make that opportunity," said Montevecchi. "We are actually changing the ecology of these animals by doing this, there is no question about it. It is basically a bird feeder for ducks."

"They will get a good carbohydrate hit from the white bread but in fact if people have brown bread that's a bit better than white bread," he continued. "Some people will actually bring chicken mesh - that really is much better for the ducks."

Montevecchi added that he has a few ideas to improve the living conditions at the pond.

"We shouldn't manicure it and let some sedges grow along the edges," he said. "It is kind of sterile around the edge. If they could not mow the lawn right to the edge in some places and let that grass grow up and have people feed it at par-

ticular places that would be really good for the ducks."

One student said that there was a problem last summer when some ducklings fell through the sewer grate and got trapped down the manhole.

Another student went into the manhole and retrieved some of them. When this happened a second time and a couple of ducklings were lost, screens were quickly put over the manholes for their protection.

Other people have a problem with the seagulls and pigeons at the pond.

"The pigeons are not really much better than rats with wings and seagulls are sort of bigger rats with wings," said Lono.

"In the summer, some people really have a problem with the gulls because they have actually gone after some of the ducklings," said Montevecchi. "That always struck people as rather tragic but it is just the way it goes."

"[The pond] should be made more friendly for the ducks or more friendly for the people because right now there is a really bad combination of neither," said Lono.

Lono says one side of the pond is really steep and it's really easy for people to fall into the water.

"It is not a problem that has come to a head yet but it definitely should be looked at before it comes to a head," said Lono. "Either put a rail around it or landscape it and put a path around it."

Montevecchi says that despite some problems the birds do enjoy living in Burton's Pond.

"They like it because the water is open and they like it because we feed them," he said. "I think they are pretty happy — they're eating, they're mating, they're quacking around...they look pretty content."

Hunt added that, "it's a weird thing you wouldn't expect to find in a university in a middle of a city. I'm really glad [Burton's Pond] is there but I think some people don't appreciate it enough."

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