

Geese on the Loose

by Lisa DiGirolamo

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When some people look at the white geese waddling along Corte Madera Creek downstream of Bon Air Bridge, they may see a charming pastoral scene; geese who honk and congregate in the marshes. But others see them as nuisances, threats to native plants, and subsequently to habitats of some of our many wonderful bird species along the creek.

A local volunteer, affectionately called Mother Goose, has been feeding the geese and ducks along Corte Madera Creek for about 20 years. Her flock of 35-40 feral domestic geese are mostly abandoned pets that she has rescued and deposited near the Bon Air Bridge, where she feeds them daily. Mother Goose displays a generous heart in her meticulous care for the animals. She takes the geese to the vet, feeds them and provides for them as they age. She is also an advocate and much needed voice for the cause of limiting abandoned pets.

Yet the geese are not welcome neighbors for other residents along Corte Madera Creek, human and otherwise.

Feeding the geese attracts wild geese and other waterfowl, allowing them to congregate in unnatural concentrations. Wild birds, capable of finding their own food, should be foraging on their own, and not rely on being fed by humans.

Worse yet, Mother Goose's geese eat native vegetation along the marsh, competing with native birds for food while degrading their habitat. Unfortunately the geese do not eat the invasive cordgrass (*Spartina* spp.), one of the biggest threats to the marshes along Corte Madera Creek. Instead, they prefer eating the native vegetation. Their feeding leaves bare patches of marsh that are likely to be colonized by invasive *Spartina*. The most common invasive cordgrass crowds out all of the high marsh native vegetation and after a short time becomes so dense that it no longer provides any habitat, not even shelter at high tides, for native wildlife like clapper rails.

The geese pose a human health hazard. Uneaten food can be found at their feeding station, attracting rats. Their abundant droppings are highly concentrated near the feeding site, posing a threat to the water quality of the creek.

As noisy creatures who are not apt to stray far from the feeding station, the geese have become a nuisance to the local residents. Homeowners with property abutting the creek complain of their droppings and their noise.

Friends have two projects negatively affected by the geese. We are working with local property owners to restore the marsh abutting the Larkspur Creekside housing development. This project, funded in part by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was conceived to improve habitat, not destroy it, for the endangered California clapper rail. On a chilly January morning, 15 volunteers from the neighboring homes planted native vegetation.

Unfortunately, these new plants are vulnerable to the grazing of the geese. Friends are also working with the California Coastal Conservancy to remove invasive *Spartina* along Corte Madera Creek. Once it is removed, bare patches are colonized by native marsh plants, which the geese also love to graze.



Too many geese have stripped the tidal marsh of its vegetation near the feeding station. Photo by Sandy Goldman.

This population of domestic geese is thriving due to human intervention and aid. Making matters worse, they are laying eggs, which if not found and destroyed, will hatch, contributing to an even larger population of long-lived pets. Geese can live 20-30 years.

Mother Goose does an admirable job of rescuing pets that are unwanted and abandoned. She uses her limited resources to help animals that are not meant to be wild and could not survive on their own in the Creek. However, thriving wild areas are in short supply along the increasingly populated areas of our creek. It would be wonderful if we could make Corte Madera Creek a sanctuary for only wild native animals and plants, and give them a chance to thrive. Animals like the endangered California clapper rail need us to preserve their habitat if they are to survive.

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