

Dispersal Call Progress

June 2004

Nigel Horton of NH Bird Management has been trialling distress calls for Canada Geese . . .

Time really does fly, it is nearly a year since I recorded 'distress calls' of adult Canada Geese and goslings during a round-up organised by CSL's Birdstrike Avoidance Team, to whom I am very grateful.

This all started after a meeting in the USA where I learned about the potential of the Canada Goose alarm call as a means of dispersal of these birds. This had never been followed up either in the USA or elsewhere! I obtained my own recording after trapping a couple of geese against a fence and blocking their exit. The gander gave a loud call of alarm that was expertly cleaned by Matt at the Scarecrow studio in Eastbourne and I took it to field test. I have to say here that young Matt is becoming all too clever at recognising what parts of a call are worth keeping and what should be chopped; I feel he is trying to do me out of a job!

The first time I used it against birds that were some distance from water, was to a flock of about 300 grazing a field some 400m from me. These literally disappeared without trace in the first few seconds of the broadcast. I never saw them go as I was starting the stopwatch and writing (I didn't expect a fast reaction if there was any at all), and when I looked back to where the birds were, there were none. I got out of the car, scanned the skies all round but did not see a single Canada Goose. Eventually I found a flock of about the same size on the river. I went back to the broadcast position that was conveniently next to a National Trust café, had a pot of tea and sandwiches and watched for the birds to return to the field but they hadn't by the time I left.

In fact they did not return until the next morning when I broadcast the call again, only this time I watched to see what happened. The geese, on hearing the call, immediately became alert and took flight towards the river; the reason I had not seen them the previous day was because they flew at ground level and hedge-hopped on their escape flight. Again they did not return until the next day.

I found this encouraging but never got a chance to test the call again because of other commitments. Then it was the breeding season, so I was left unsure as to whether my recording was as effective as that reported by the American researchers or whether the dispersal effect was due to it being a novel experience for the geese. If it was the latter, habituation would soon set in. I was also concerned by what was known of this species that it is very easy to scare when away from water. This was demonstrated on a recent visit to the Shetlands where one airport has a regular problem with Canada Geese grazing around the approach lights, they scare these in the morning and they don't return again that day.

Obtaining distress calls was not as straightforward as I thought. On previous round-ups of Canada Geese for ringing and marking, I had often heard the goslings give a call when picked up but had never had any means to record them.

Scarecrow provided me with a Sony MP3 recorder, mike and pre-amplifier and verbal instructions on their use and off I trotted to the CSL round-ups that often started at 04.30h!

Initially when a call was heard, I rushed to the recording equipment, turned it on and rushed back to find the calling bird was quiet and subdued. Obviously, this would not work, so I fixed the microphone to the holding pen where all the geese were held and left it on record to capture any calls given when the birds were picked up. Unfortunately, it also recorded general chatter of the handlers plus the odd cry of pain from the same when pecked, usually in the fleshy area of the armpit! However, from all of these we selected and edited one adult and four gosling calls for field testing.

It has to be said that to my ears, that are suspect, the call of the adult goose is not dissimilar to the alarm call I obtained earlier and initial reaction was the same. The response to the gosling calls is yet to be determined as flocks of geese have been difficult to find in suitable test locations where repeat broadcasts can be made. It is known that an 'alarm call' and the 'distress call' of the adult causes a reaction that appears to be more effective the further away the birds are from water. I do not know how long this effect will last and this is vital before any new call is placed on the market.

Interestingly, this winter, the goose distribution in my testing area has changed. The field by the National Trust café has never been used; I have received reports of large numbers of Canada Geese at a location that are never there when I go. This has proved to be a major handicap and frustration. Or if I do find a flock, it is in a location close to London Heathrow, Farnborough or Blackbushe where to disperse the birds could create a problem for the airport.

Where next? At the end of June I will be assisting CSL with this year's Canada Goose round-up and the microphone will again be tied to the pen to obtain more calls. This year I hope to get more goose calls than those of humans in pain!

If you know of a site, well away from water that is regularly grazed by Canada Geese, please let Scarecrow or myself know. The nearer it is to Guildford the better but I will consider anywhere.

Many thanks.

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