

The Scoop on the Poop

Not long ago, Donna Lynn Rhodes was stepping out with the British royalty—allegedly. This week she's sidestepping the poop at Walnut Creek's Heather Farm Park.

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Two things I want to clear up straight away. One: The park is not called Heather Farms. It's Heather Farm. Two: It's not OK to ignore the signs and feed the geese.

Heather Farm Park is a jewel in the City of Walnut Creek's crown. It is 102 acres of year-round nature, fun and recreation.

So why let a little poop get in the way?

Easy. It's everywhere.

Whether you are strolling, biking, running or playing, it's hard not to step in it. Maybe Jack London thought it was the call of the wild he heard, but around the park it's, "Oh s—t!"

And I'm not talking about dog poop – shame on the owners who should know better and don't clean up after their pooch – I'm talking about goose poop. It's everywhere and it's nasty. Trying to avoid it is like walking through a sanitation minefield.

And we're not helping the situation, in fact, we're hurting it.

The signs that are posted everywhere asking you to not feed the wildlife are there for a reason. The wildlife, by their very nature, don't need to come to our supper table to survive. They get everything they need from nature, and there's plenty of that to go around at Heather Farm.

If you are more of a numbers person, do the math. An average goose eats four pounds of food a day and craps out three pounds of it.

I know it's fun to throw bits of stale bread at the geese and watch as they squawk and run to retrieve it, but you're just adding to the mess. And I can promise you this: You're not hanging around to clean up your bread droppings, are you?

Well, Rich Payne and Mike Vickers are. Rich is the City of Walnut Creek's public services manager and Mike is the city's park maintenance supervisor. They oversee all the city's sports fields and half of its parks – which includes Heather Farm.

Rich, Mike and their team do a phenomenal job of maintaining Heather Farm and truly help to make it such a great place for us to hang out. And when I stop and think about it, for the same reasons we like it so much, so does the wildlife. I'd say Heather Farm must be like a five-star hotel to geese flying down from Canada.

Which brings us back to the poop.

According to Mike, the poop is worse at Heather Farm because the park attracts more geese than all the other parks. "The park is perfect for them," he told us. "Eight acres of water, 30 acres of well-maintained turf – their No. 1 food supply – and unfortunately an abundance of people food."

The city knows the problems and has tried various ways in the past to get rid of the geese humanely and thus get rid of the poop. And now it is happy to report there is a new program which should make everyone happy – well, maybe not geese looking for a nice spot to vacation.

According to Mike, the city is starting a year-round program at Heather Farm to encourage the geese to find another place to settle. There are two parts to this program.

The first is to try to get dogs to chase the geese away. The city has contracted with a San Lorenzo-based company called 4-Paws Goose Control, which has two handlers and two dogs who go to Heather Farm once a day, five days a week.

The company bills itself as "a wildlife management service that humanely disperses nuisance Canada geese and wild turkeys" from people's properties. It uses border collies to deal with the geese because they are herders, not biters. The dogs just want to round up the geese and very subtly encourage them to pack their bags, spread their wings and fly south. It sounds like a gentle game of Duck Duck Goose and should be quite effective but apparently the geese that hang out at Heather Farm are anything but "bird brains." They have started to recognize the 4-Paws truck and fly the coop before the handlers let the dogs out. 4-Paws handlers stopped coming first thing in the morning because the geese apparently can tell time, too.

The second part of the new program incorporates strobe lighting to deter the geese. They may be smart, but apparently they are not big fans of disco.

Mike explained that geese roost in the pond at night for protection from other wildlife. One female goose surrounds the group, keeping a watchful eye out for predators. The strobe lights distract the geese and make the female uncomfortable so she sends out a bird call telling the other geese, "Let's get out of here!"

According to Mike, "We have installed remote-controlled strobe lights in the pond that rotate 360 degrees, flashing across the water. And because the lights don't flash up in the sky, they will not be a nuisance or a problem for the public or the people living in the homes nearby."

This program is costing the city money, which eventually comes out of the taxes we pay. I don't know about you, but I think that we could all help by not feeding the geese and adding to the problem. The Walnut Creek Police Department doesn't have time to cite everyone who's talking and texting while driving, let alone ticket people feeding the geese.

So that's the scoop on the poop. Before all you tree-huggers and naturalists write to me about saving the wildlife, please remember that I am not for or against the geese. I am, however, for Heather Farm Park and enjoying a picture-perfect picnic without all the poop.