

# The Guardian



## Gaggle of Cambridge University students criticise geese-cull plans

**Rapidly growing Canada goose population is health hazard but quarter of King's students sign petition to spare the birds**

**Rebecca Ratcliffe**

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It's been an exasperating week for Philip Isaac, domus bursar at King's College, Cambridge University. It all started with an impassioned letter from students which, invoking the words of Gandhi, called for the peaceful coexistence of scholars and geese. It was only a matter of time before the press got wind of the petition. Journalists flocked to cover the story of the college that's murdering its wildlife.

The cause of the dispute? The local gaggle of Canada geese at King's has grown rapidly over the past three years and is now proving a health and safety hazard, but students say culling the animals would be cruel and inhumane.

Isaac said he wasn't surprised by the controversy, but he pointed out that no one is campaigning on behalf of the college mice and rats, who faced a similar fate. "I'm sure most institutions like this have issues with animals like that. Carpet moths, do they have a right to live?" he said.

“They eat a huge amount of grass,” said Isaac of the geese, adding that the birds pass excrement various times an hour. “It’s the lower-paid staff who are clearing it. Students aren’t clearing it. The trouble is it’s a health hazard. There are lots of diseases that can be spread through their excrement which can be quite nasty to humans.” The geese have even been known to attack members of the public queuing for evensong.

King’s - and its neighbouring colleges - is searching for ways to move the birds off the college grounds. It has debated whether to install an audio box that plays the sound of a strangled goose for three minutes every hour. It has also considered mounting laser on the top of its historic buildings, but the option was ruled out because of concerns it might damage students’ eyesight. “You can purchase what are known as decoys, a cardboard cutout of a wolf or something,” Isaac said. “We chose not to because we didn’t want people taking photos of our cardboard cutouts, and to become the butt of everyone’s humour.”

For the moment, porters have been kitted out with handheld laser torches to scare off the birds at night. “It frightens them. They think something is going on in the environment, at which point they’re supposed to waddle off,” said Neil Seabridge, the head porter at King’s. A pen has also been set up to try and capture the geese for removal but Isaac is not hopeful. “Last year we put so much corn feed in that pen, we moved it twice, but not once did the geese go near it,” he said.

In a letter to the college council, the students wrote that “geese - as sentient beings - have intrinsic value and therefore deserve a life free from suffering and human exploitation”. A quarter of the college’s student body, 180 people, signed the petition. Since the row erupted, porters have reported strange incidents, including a decapitated goose left on the quad lawn.

Cambridge colleges aren’t the only ones culling geese. In January, Sandwell council was criticised for tampering with more than 250 goose eggs. The council had abandoned a cull after a backlash from campaigners. In Birmingham there have been calls to cull a 100-strong flock that residents say is preventing children from enjoying a local park.

The RSPCA said it is opposed in principle to the killing or taking of all wild animals and would always encourage people to use non-harmful methods of deterrence. but it “accepts in some cases where all alternatives have failed that there may be a proven case for it”.

Among Cambridge locals, most say they would rather the colleges stick to humane methods. Bob Knighton, 21, who is studying physics, said the geese were a bit playful, but he wouldn’t like to see them culled. “The geese sometimes like to bite, but that’s about it. It’s not that hard to stay away from them. They’re not that big,” he said.

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