

## COUNTRY EYE by Brian Webster

### Evening Flight at Pitsford Water

As I sat in my conservatory watching a lurid blood-red sunset they came over, just above treetop level, honking like a fleet of taxicabs with hiccups. About twenty of them, Canada geese on their way to an overnight feast of spilled grain in the farmers' fields.

These in your face birds have become such a part of the national scene that it is hard to realize that they are, in fact, recent additions to our fauna. They were brought here from their North American homelands in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to grace the lakes in the ornamental grounds of the rich. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century escapes were becoming commonplace, but even as late as 1950 they were not common in the wild in Northamptonshire.

As part of my job at the Northampton Museums I was given a collection of eggs, made by a boy from Earls Barton, in the 1950's. Although egg collecting was illegal even in those days, it was still something that boys did. Among them was what I believe was a Canada goose egg, and if I am right this may well be one of the first records of the species nesting along this part of the Nene valley.

And from small beginnings the Canada goose has flourished. Its numbers have increased to the point where it has acquired pest status. The wildlife enthusiasts dislike it because its aggressive behaviour prevents other species from nesting nearby. Only the mute swan is big enough to face it down. (Ironically the mute swan itself, although native in some areas, was semi-domesticated as long ago as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Not for its beauty, but because our ancestors knew a good meal when they saw one.) Many farmers complain that the winter feeding flocks, often several hundreds strong, lead to compaction of the soil, which makes spring-growing crops grow more slowly.

In their native area Canada geese are strongly migratory, their autumn travels taking them from the Canadian Arctic as far south as Mexico. Over here they tend to be largely resident, so it is tempting to think that, having been uprooted and transported half a world away from home, they have forgotten which way to go. The reality is that our winters are much milder so there is no need for them to migrate.

Many of you will have been enthralled by the shots of wild geese arriving on their wintering grounds in the BBC series 'Autumn Watch.' Unfortunately we have no such thing around here, although a few geese, thought to be from the far north, do turn up at places like Pitsford Water, and duly have their names taken to be recorded for posterity in the pages of the county bird report.

So the spectacle of Canada geese honking their way across an autumn sky is about as near as we are likely to get.

486 words. Picture to follow from Jane and Dave