

Westmoreland Park Duck Round-up

by Bob Sallinger, Conservation Director

In September Portland Audubon, the City of Portland, and USDA Wildlife Services will partner on an effort to capture and find permanent homes for nearly 100 domestic ducks and geese that live at Westmoreland Park in southeast Portland. The “round-up” is part of a larger project being led by the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services to restore Crystal Springs Creek.

Crystal Springs Creek is a tributary of lower Johnson Creek in southeast Portland. The creek originates from a spring near Reed College and flows through Eastmoreland Golf Course and then into Westmoreland Park before eventually joining with Johnson Creek and ultimately the Willamette River. Before development this area provided wetlands which retained excess water from flood events and provided important rearing and refuge habitat for Coho and Chinook Salmon and steelhead trout, and foraging and nesting sites for beavers, birds, turtles, frogs, and other wildlife. The City of Portland and multiple partners are engaged in a multi-year effort to remove culverts, restore a more natural stream channel, and reestablish vegetated riparian buffers. Ultimately what this project will do is cool and clean the water flowing into Johnson Creek and help restore fish and wildlife populations in the heart of southeast Portland.

Significant work has already been completed in Reed College Canyon. In 2012, the City will begin work in Westmoreland Park. Today the creek flows into a shallow, cement-lined pond at the north end of the park and then into a narrow cement-lined channel. The landscape is virtually devoid of vegetation — even the grass is nibbled down to the barest nubs. The creek water warms and becomes polluted as it passes through. Guided by a master plan developed with extensive community input, the pond will be narrowed, and a more natural, narrow meander buffered by extensive plantings will be established.

That is where the Duck Round-up comes in. Over the years huge populations of ducks and geese have become established at Westmoreland Park. Many of these ducks and geese are domestic waterfowl that were purchased as



Domestic ducks at Westmoreland Park © Bob Sallinger

Can You Provide a Home for Domestic Ducks and Geese?

Audubon is looking for good permanent homes for domestic ducks and geese that have been abandoned in our local parks and natural areas. We are looking for farm settings or rural homes with private ponds where these abandoned domestic waterfowl can live out their lives. The Westmoreland duck round-up in September will create a particularly large immediate demand. However, we see a steady stream of these animals throughout the rest of the year as well.



Domestic goose in need of good home © Wildlife Care Center

Please contact us if you have a private pond or an appropriate area on your property for one of more of these birds. Contact Dr. Deb Sheaffer at dsheaffer@audubonportland.org.



Ducks, gulls, and geese being fed bread at Westmoreland Park © Bob Sallinger

ducklings and goslings at pet stores and feed stores and then illegally abandoned when their owners discovered that they grew into noisy, messy, expensive-to-feed adults. Generations of abandoned domestic waterfowl have proliferated at the park. Although often done with good intentions, abandoning domestic ducks in public parks is illegal, inhumane, and destructive to the environment. These ducks are poorly equipped to survive in the wild — they don't have the wild instincts of native birds and many are not even able to fly. They are easy prey for dogs and other predators.

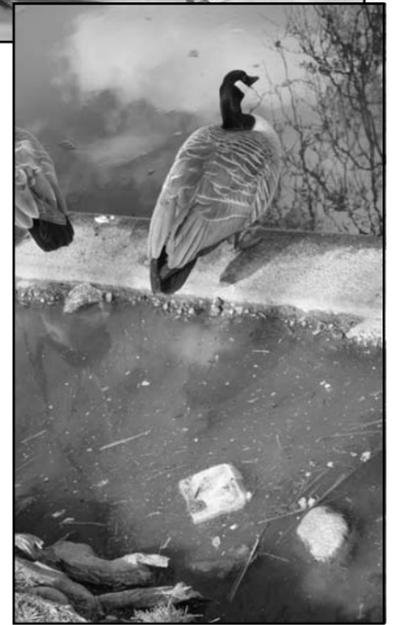
The situation has been further exacerbated by extensive intentional feeding of the ducks, geese, gulls, and crows that inhabit the park. It is virtually impossible to visit Westmoreland Park without observing somebody tossing a small mountain of bread to the birds — so much so that the park is perpetually covered in a carpet of moldy, soggy bread. While again done with the best of intentions, feeding these birds has exactly the opposite result. It causes the birds to congregate in unnaturally large numbers — far more than the limited habitat can support. Wild ducks and geese are drawn to the site for the handouts and can quickly lose their natural instincts to move from location to location and then migrate. Bread is basically junk food for birds and it can cause a variety of nutritional problems. Perhaps the most visible problem is a condition known as “angel wing,” in which the outer tips of the wings appear to have flipped upside down. This condition is a direct result of growing ducks that have been fed too high a protein diet such as bread while they were developing. It is incurable, prevents flight, and is almost entirely associated with ducks that live in parks.

Duck feeding leads to many additional problems as well. Unnaturally large congregations of ducks and geese decimate vegetation and degrade water quality. They also display unnaturally aggressive behaviors toward one another, especially during breeding season. Each year our Wildlife Care Center takes in dozens of female park ducks



Duck, geese, and bread at Westmoreland Park. Notice also the cement edges surrounding the pond. © Bob Sallinger

that have suffered gruesome injuries including broken legs, backs, and wings, and lacerated scalps and backs as a result of hyper-aggressive male courtship competition. In order to escape from the males, females nest far from water, sometimes up to a couple of miles. They then need to lead their flightless young on foot back to water through the hazardous urban streetscape. In recent years our Care Center has experienced huge increases in the number of orphaned ducklings that have become separated from their mothers during these hazardous traverses — peaking at nearly 400 in 2010.



Degraded habitat, geese, and bread at Westmoreland Park © Bob Sallinger

Sadly, these conditions are not unique to Westmoreland Park. Park ponds throughout the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region are experiencing similar challenges.

When Crystal Springs is restored to more natural conditions in 2012, the existing duck and goose populations will be displaced. The native ducks and geese will be able to fly to new and appropriate locations, but the domestics — many of which are unflighted, lack natural instincts and are almost entirely dependent on human handouts — will be stranded.

Audubon, working with the City and USDA Wildlife Services, will trap between 70 and 100 domestic ducks and geese from Westmoreland Park in mid-September. Using temporary fencing, we will funnel the waterfowl into a large box trap. Any native ducks and geese will be released, but domestic waterfowl will be captured, examined, and then transported to pre-selected permanent homes where they can live out their lives. The hope is that by the time restoration activities begin in 2012, the park will be virtually free of domestic waterfowl. The longer-term vision is of a restored Westmoreland Park in which native ducks and geese visit, breed, and forage in more natural numbers — a situation that will be far healthier and more humane than the conditions that exist today.



Bread litters the beach at Milwaukie Riverfront Park — the problems are not limited to just Westmoreland © Bob Sallinger

Other Ways You Can Help

- Only purchase ducks and geese if you are truly able to provide a permanent home for these animals. Understand the needs of these animals before you acquire them.
- Discourage your children's class from raising animals unless they have identified appropriate permanent homes before the project begins.
- Never abandon a domestic duck or goose in the wild — it is illegal, inhumane, and bad for the environment.
- Report any sightings of people abandoning animals in parks to the local park authority.
- Please do not feed the waterfowl — even with the best intentions, it does real harm!