

Birds, bugs, beasts

THE NASTY CULEX TARSALEIS (West Nile virus) and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (“mad cow”) grab the headlines, but they’re merely the most visible challenges for governments managing responsibilities related to the animal kingdom. Just for today, let’s expand the definition of “animal kingdom” to include all non-human creatures, from bacteria to birds to border collies to bugs, and look at a few things governments are called on to handle – some of them quite pleasant.

Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) is advertising for a falconer to manage its bird control program at Canadian Forces Base Halifax and around the dockyard. Apparently public works has had its eye on the award-winning bird control program at the local airport, which uses the only full-time airport falconer in Canada to disperse flocks of hungry snow buntings and geese. Public affairs director Pat Chapman confirms Halifax International says the program works well.

Falconry has been used at Canadian airports for 40 years. Transport Canada says it has the advantage of good optics: “The practice offers real public relations benefits as well, since many animal-welfare groups look upon falconry as a humane method of wildlife control,” the department’s website says.

Alternatively, CFB Halifax could relocate its excess waterfowl to Manitoba where the province has now paid the second of five \$200,000 installments to run the Oak Hammock Marsh Conservation Centre 30 km north of Winnipeg. The centre features a 120-seat multimedia theatre, rooftop observation deck and interactive exhibits to educate the public about the value of wetlands. Voted “Canada’s best outdoor attraction,” the centre perches among 30 kilometres of dike trails leading into a 36 square kilometre restored remnant of the historic St. Andrews Bog that once covered 450 square kilometres of southern Manitoba. Almost 300 species of birds and thousands of species of mammals, insects, amphibians, reptiles and other wildlife rely on this habitat.

The crowded Manitoba marsh is the lush counterpart of what may well be the driest, loneliest wildlife conservation area in Canada, the Suffield National Wildlife Area in Alberta. Protected under the *Canada Wildlife Act*, the 458 square kilometres of relatively undisturbed native grassland was formally carved last year out of Canadian Forces Base Suffield, just west of Medicine Hat. There’s no multimedia theatre or observation deck here – no-one outside the armed forces is allowed onto the base.

Suffield is better known for its international troop-training programs and its biological warfare research. At the moment, PWGSC has a notice of proposed procurement on the books to attract a team to develop and purify polyclonal antibodies for immunoassay applications – biotechnological tools to identify and fight some biological threat agents: *Vibrio cholerae*, *Coxiella burnetii*, yellow fever virus, and *Yersinia pestis*. Presumably the deer and the antelope are safe from both the threat agents and the antibodies.

The Suffield base is extremely discreet about its work. Could it possibly deserve credit for developing the system used to treat

uniforms that protect our troops in Afghanistan from a deeply unappealing category of wildlife? As if it isn’t enough to serve in an alternately freezing and broiling wasteland, our beleaguered troops are exposed to disease-causing arthropods – insects, mites, spiders, scorpions, and crustaceans with segmented bodies and legs. To fend off these pests, the uniforms are given “the permethrin-pouch treatment,” the Canadian Forces website says, and also adds that clothing treated with the contact insecticide poses no health hazard to people or pets.

That’s a good thing for any soldiers on leave in Calgary, where pets are treated very well indeed, partly because the municipal government works hard to educate owners to be responsible. Bill Bruce, manager of animal and bylaw services for the City of Calgary has just received the first Harold F. Dates Award of Excellence for his highly successful program that returns strays to their owners. The \$3-million animal control program is totally funded by dog licence fees and revenue from violations.



Heck's Pictorial Archive of Military Sciences, Geography and History

Falconry, an ancient practice, continues well into the future.

Because almost 92,000 of the city’s 98,000 dogs are licensed, a bylaw officer with a laptop can easily search the owner database and deliver Fido straight home. If for some reason the dog goes unclaimed after five days, it awaits a new owner in the city’s clean, bright shelter. “Last year we saved 96 percent. Our euthanization rate is four percent. It goes from eight or 10 percent to up to 70 percent in other cities,” Bruce says. “Vicious or sick or non-adoptable animals don’t even get reported in other cities.”

Amazingly, Calgary even has a 50-percent return rate for cats, which are not licensed. “We teach cat owners the importance of keeping a cat indoors and encourage people to spay and neuter. That’s critical.” The city and the SPCA jointly take care of animals rescued from fires or from domestic situations.

If, by chance, there’s an unclaimed border collie, Bruce might send it to CFB Halifax in case the falconry plan doesn’t get off the ground. Tireless and highly intelligent, border collies have proven adept at dispersing birds at Vancouver International and deer at Cold Lake Air Force Base. They’re environmentally friendly, have good optics, and, enraptured though a falconer may be with his bird, he’ll find collies are clearly cuddlier. ^{MM}

Melanie Collison is a High River, Alberta-based freelance writer.