



Ask A Scientist!

Do you have a science question about southeastern Idaho that you have been wanting to ask, but haven't? Well, what are you waiting for!? E-mail your questions to us at askascientist@postregister.com and a local scientist will answer them for you in the Ask A Scientist column or on the Ask A Scientist website.

Today's Question Submitted by:

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Question answered by:

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Regional Conservation Educator
Idaho Fish and Game

Q: Why do the ducks/geese all line up at the waterfalls edge by the Falls? Is it warmer there? Is there food they catch there? What gives?

A: Here in Idaho Falls, most everyone has seen the ducks and especially Canada Geese lined up in a row along the edge of the waterfall on the Snake River as it runs through downtown. Asking why do they line up like that is a great question. Because the waterfowl can't tell us why they like to gather on the falls, we'll have to use a little scientific investigation to come up with a theory.

Predation - Could the waterfowl seek out the falls as a haven from predators? The idea sounds possible, but informal observation of the ducks and geese on the greenbelt shows that most live long and happy lives, with the exception of being chased by a dog or a toddler now and then. In fact, the nearly constant presence of humans probably helps to scare predators away. Idaho Fish and Game has even found injured birds with compound fractures several years old surviving nicely along the river, so that predation doesn't seem to be an issue.



Food - Ducks and geese are a lot like people, the easiest and fastest way to get food is often the most popular. Both birds eat primarily vegetation. You'll notice them constantly sticking their heads under the water. This is to get at the plants growing there. By sitting on the lip of the falls, the birds

have learned that the dislodged vegetation comes to them, sort of like having pizza delivered. They just sit there and strain the water that comes by, the more geese in a row, the bigger the strainer! Plus, standing on the concrete lip that creates the falls is less work than swimming around in chilly water.

Social - Ducks and geese are very social creatures and for the most part like to hang around in flocks when possible. When geese gather on the ground they're called a gaggle, when they are in the air they're called a skein.

It's fun to go and watch the ducks and geese, and while the human urge to feed them may make us feel good, but in reality may not be the best thing for them or us. While the birds may gobble bread and crusts, these stale tidbits lack everything a healthy natural diet has to offer. Also, because the birds are fed year round, they tend to get lazy and forgo the work of migrating. Large congregations of birds not only deposit large amounts of messy droppings, but they also can ruin lawns and golf courses and be safety hazards at nearby airports. So next time you are down at the falls enjoying watching the ducks and geese, remember to let them do what comes naturally when it comes to eating and resist the urge to toss them something that they might gobble up, but isn't that healthy.



Migration Hopscotch

Canada Geese that don't have a winter-long source of food must migrate many miles to find a warmer climate with plenty of food. Finding safe areas along their migration route where they can feed and rest is necessary. Play this game to discover the importance of resting areas to migrating birds.

1. Draw a hopscotch course on the playground or your driveway with chalk. The squares should be large (3 feet x 3 feet) and the course should contain 10 squares.
2. Pretend you are a migrating bird. Each of the squares represents a resting area. Migrate through the course without leaving the course or stepping on the lines.
3. Now mark an "X" in two of the squares. These X's represent destroyed resting areas. Try the course again without stepping on the X'ed squares. Was it more difficult to migrate? Mark X's in two more squares and try the course again.
4. After playing this game, do you have an idea how important resting areas are to migrating birds?

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