



Our Hen House

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Interview with David Karopkin

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DAVID KAROPKIN** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 231.*

ALESSANDRA: Our final interview of the episode will introduce you to the noble work of David Karopkin, founder of GooseWatch NYC, a group committed to combating the USDA Wildlife Services' killing of New York City's Canada geese. David will talk about the amazing endeavors of GooseWatch NYC as well as share a video that highlights the ridiculousness of the Wildlife Services campaign. Take a listen.

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, David.

DAVID: Oh, thank you so much, Jasmin and Mariann. I'm so happy to be here.

JASMIN: We're very happy you're here, especially because we know that you're a law student and so you're like smack in the middle of finals right now.

MARIANN: Yeah, I hope we're not destroying your law career.

JASMIN: I'm surprised you're still standing up.

DAVID: We just finished the semester, and I've got three finals in the next week and a half, so yeah.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: Well, the best way to prepare for finals is to come and be on the Our Hen House TV show, as well as to actually --

JASMIN: Yeah, you get extra credit for this, I think. So I know that you work with animals other than geese, but I would really like to start with geese because I want to know how they became such a "problem." Big quotes here, "problem." When we were kids, which wasn't at the same time, but I think it was probably the same for when you were a kid, you didn't even see geese that much. They would like fly over.

MARIANN: Yeah, I don't know when it happened. When I was a kid, they would fly over once a year and then they would fly back. And that's the only time, and it was exciting. "Oh, the geese are there."

JASMIN: Yeah. What happened, David?

DAVID: Sure. Well, this idea that geese are a problem is an opinion, it's a perspective that people have. And I don't think there's any question that over the past 40, 50 years the population has grown significantly. And so conflicts with geese have become more and more of an issue. One of the things that I've been kind of trying to advocate for is coexistence and tolerance with urban wildlife. And so for example in New York City, which is where I got involved 'cause I'm born in Brooklyn, raised my whole life here.

JASMIN: Oh, Brooklyn native!

DAVID: And I got involved in this issue after they rounded up I guess 368 geese from Prospect Park. And so I was coming at it from a couple of different -- 'cause I was very confused. A lot of people in my community were trying to figure out why it happened, how we could stop it from happening again. And we spent a lot of time really learning about the bigger picture and the issues about what you're describing, about how people are complaining about geese.

JASMIN: Why do they hate geese?

MARIANN: I think that one of the reasons obviously is just that there are a lot of them, and people just hate animals that do well in the presence of humans. It just seems like nobody likes an animal that does well. But one of the issues with geese I think is aviation safety. At least that's certainly the issue that's trotted out when people want to get rid of the geese.

DAVID: For sure. Migratory birds are protected but they get exemptions and you can kill geese and a lot of other animals. One of the things that I've advocated is to say that, take New York City for example, where we are killing geese in New York City parks to protect aviation safety. But that's one of a few reasons that you can kill geese, because they're causing property damage or just creating a nuisance and just bothering you and scaring you.

MARIANN: People don't like the fact that they poop.

DAVID: Yeah. Well, we have eight million people in New York City, and it's about 700,000 square miles, 20,000 Canada geese, and they don't invade your apartment, they live in parks.

JASMIN: Right, yeah, exactly. Now, when that plane went down in the Hudson River, can we talk about this?

MARIANN: That really heightened the awareness of geese.

JASMIN: It did.

DAVID: It did. And it heightened the awareness of the issue of bird strikes, which is, as we have millions of birds that fly along the Atlantic Flyway, every year millions of birds are migrating and we have geese and other birds that live in the area year round. And we're putting more airplanes up in the air than ever. So just as we have conflicts with people, we have eight million people in New York City, conflict is inevitable, but we don't kill each other to resolve those issues. But we take a much different view and approach when it comes to birds. And so after the Miracle on the Hudson, the immediate and initial reaction was to kill the geese in New York City.

MARIANN: Yeah. Well, I don't think any of us are in favor of planes going down, but what is the problem with just taking the approach of kill the geese? Is it going to be an effective way to address this issue?

DAVID: And that's the big question is, why is this happening, how can we get to the heart of why it's happening and prevent it and implement real solutions that protect people first and foremost, and I'm sure that the government is primarily concerned with that. But at the same time wildlife, first of all, deserve some protection and consideration. And second of all, not only is there no evidence that killing geese or other birds is actually improving air safety or making anybody safer, I mean, it's costing millions of dollars and alternatives are being ignored.

MARIANN: That's exactly what I was thinking, that it creates the illusion that something's being done about this, but as you've made the point, we can't wipe out every bird on the East Coast or in the world or whatever. There are birds out there. We have to learn how to fly planes with the presence of birds.

DAVID: Yeah, we certainly do. If you look at it like this, first of all just to be clear the Miracle on the Hudson involved migratory geese that were coming down from Canada, so the killing of the geese in New York City parks which are resident geese... somebody described it to me as killing all your house mice as a way of getting rid of the mice in the field.

JASMIN: That's an interesting analogy.

DAVID: What we think is happening is that the government agencies who are charged with protecting our safety are saying, we're just gonna go start killing all of these animals and hope that has some kind of an impact on reducing the number of bird strikes. But remember, it just takes one bird and one collision.

JASMIN: Right. Well, what does the USDA do when they round them up?

DAVID: So the way this works is USDA is a federal agency, they're a contractor. They used to be called Animal Damage Control, now they're called Wildlife Services.

MARIANN: That name just freaks me out.

JASMIN: I never knew that.

MARIANN: Wildlife Services is the agency that goes and kills wildlife. It's a service.

DAVID: And they are basically contract killers. They don't work for free and they can't just show up and kill geese. They need permission from landowners and municipalities, and they get paid handsomely to conduct these roundups over the summer. And the way that this has gone in New York City and other places is that in the months of June and July when the geese are molting, they lose their flight feathers and they're raising their babies, USDA agents in the early morning hours when there aren't many people around corral these birds and pack them into turkey crates and send them to either be gassed or slaughtered.

JASMIN: I believe that we have a video that you took of some USDA agents rounding up some geese, so let's take a look at that.

[SEE TV SHOW FOR VIDEO]

MARIANN: Wow.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: They really didn't want you there, did they?

DAVID: Oh no.

MARIANN: They'd like to keep that a secret.

DAVID: And that video was the culmination of three years of effort. When I started GooseWatch, the reason was because after the first roundup in Prospect Park, the local community was upset, animal activists were furious. And we just were looking for some answers. We wanted to know why this was happening, how we could stop it from happening again, and months went by and we had no answers just with regards to Prospect Park, whether or not there was gonna be a roundup a second summer.

JASMIN: So this was going on in Prospect Park?

MARIANN: Where was that filmed?

DAVID: Well, that was filmed at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.

MARIANN: Refuge.

DAVID: Wildlife Refuge. And so what happened was the first summer that they rounded up the geese in Prospect Park led to this movement really of local community activists who were really just appalled that this had happened. And even though Prospect Park was the epicenter of that debate and the subject, they're rounding up geese in dozens of parks across New York City. And what I decided after waiting months of trying to have an answer as to whether or not the roundup would take place in Prospect Park a second summer, see I live and grew up a mile away from Prospect Park, and I decided I wasn't gonna be asleep in my bed. If they came back to Prospect Park a second summer I would be there with a camera so that we could provide some of these images because the USDA was saying that this is humane euthanasia.

MARIANN: Just looking at it, it just gave me absolutely the chills. You couldn't even really see into those. I can't imagine what it would be like to see into those cages. They must have been terrified, those birds.

DAVID: Well, it's easy to see that when you finally get the video. But this is one of the best and only videos that there are of how the USDA does their business. They don't appreciate transparency and I've asked them to allow us to accompany their roundup operations with a neutral third party cameraperson. But they really, they don't want people seeing what it is that they're doing, so...

MARIANN: 'Cause when people see horrible things happening to animals, they care. They just don't want that to happen.

JASMIN: Yeah. And obviously, even animal rights activists don't want there to be plane crashes. But they don't want geese killed if it's not the best way to approach the situation. So what is the best way to keep planes and geese from each other?

DAVID: Well, it's not a simple answer, and that's why I've spent, and GooseWatch has been networking with aviation experts who are independent from government and who are looking at this with kind of a look towards the future of what aviation is gonna be, because killing is not an effective response. In the past two years, recent FOIL documents have shown that the Port Authority has killed 20,000 birds just shooting them on sight.

MARIANN: That's horrible.

DAVID: And the number of bird strikes, just to put it in perspective, is minuscule. It's way less than 1% of the total number of flights that take off and land, and the number of times that they end up in the Hudson River in an emergency landing, it's a very small percentage, which is not to say that it's not a very scary possibility. But the response that's taken... you know how you described how people hate geese? The Miracle on the Hudson was a catalyst to enter into the kind of contract that we're seeing that's saying we have to kill these birds in order to protect aviation safety without having any kind of a basis or a justification for thinking that killing geese is actually going to have the desired effect of reducing air strikes or preserving air safety and keeping people safe, just a way of making people feel like something's being done.

MARIANN: I think you run into that so often in animal issues. Someone is making money somewhere and there's just a quick reaction, let's kill them, without any real examination of not only whether that's cruel -- I mean of course that's an important answer -- but also whether it's actually going to fix the situation. It's just, let's kill them.

JASMIN: Now let's talk about GooseWatch. You mentioned GooseWatch a couple times. I love your shirt. Can you show us? This is a great shirt. Yeah, and talk about GooseWatch and what your hopes are for it.

DAVID: Okay. Well, we started just looking at geese, but it's really grown into a kind of an understanding that there's a bigger picture, first of all with respect to urban wildlife just here in New York City, and the kind of things that we're seeing here are happening in other places.

MARIANN: Of course. The USDA is involved. That means it's happening all over the country, no doubt.

DAVID: The USDA, you mentioned money, they -- and two years ago, I mean they profit... 125 million dollars. This is money that goes from local municipalities to pay for the services of rounding up and killing these birds.

MARIANN: Follow the money.

DAVID: And the aviation justification is not the only one that they use. Like you said, they poop, so we have to kill them. And sure enough, there are so many instances where, after a flock of geese is wiped out, within four or six weeks there's another flock that replaces them.

MARIANN: Of course. Killing wild animals just doesn't help get rid of them, even if you agree that should be the goal. It doesn't work.

JASMIN: Do you do political organizing?

DAVID: We've started to do political organizing. I think that it's very clear that this is not just an issue of science and merit, but politics. When, after the Miracle on the Hudson and the USDA entered into contract with the city, it was Mayor Bloomberg who championed that contract and the need to take this very aggressive effort of killing geese in New York City parks. And so even though you have different government agencies like the FAA and the USDA saying that we have to kill these birds, the actual decision is with the municipality. The mayor has the choice of saying, "No, we're not gonna do this your way." There's a lot of -- it's very complicated because of the relationship between the Port Authority and the city.

MARIANN: Yeah, it always gets complicated, but the bottom line always comes down to let's kill the animals.

JASMIN: Right. Let's kill them. Let's exploit them and kill them.

MARIANN: Yeah, 'cause people don't know, they don't know people are gonna be upset. I'm glad you're speaking up for them.

JASMIN: David's doing incredible work. I just love that you saw a problem here and you said, well let's fix this.

MARIANN: Can you talk a little bit about the swans? Do we have a moment to talk about the swans?

JASMIN: We have just a moment to talk about the swans.

DAVID: Sure, and that's what I was talking about GooseWatch expanding because we know that it's not just geese. Turkeys by the way in Staten Island are getting rounded up for no other reason than because they poop. And the DEC recently released a plan that they want to exterminate all mute swans in the state of New York on the basis that they consider them an invasive species.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: People love swans. That's crazy.

JASMIN: Well, and they hate them. And they love them and they hate them. And they want them only when they want them, and then they don't want them because they poop. And it's just crazy. How can someone get involved with GooseWatch NYC?

DAVID: Well, first of all, check out the website. Brush up on some of the information that we have posted there. Get in contact with me. We have a group of volunteers that are working together to figure out what exactly our next steps are gonna be, whether it's outreach and tabling in parks and reaching out to people and letting them know, because most people still are unaware that this is happening. And to the extent that they are aware, the myth that we have to kill geese to protect aviation safety still needs to be contradicted. And that's why we've recruited aviation experts who are saying that really there's radar technology, there's

so many other viable alternatives that haven't been explored. And we're killing first without really doing anything else.

JASMIN: Right, exactly. And you're doing so much else and you're really raising awareness.

MARIANN: I love that there are people sticking up for urban wildlife.

JASMIN: Yeah. I do too.

MARIANN: Those are tough animals who are just trying to get by and they need friends.

JASMIN: And David is such a change maker already. And I know that you're taking Animal Law at Brooklyn Law School and I know that Piper Hoffman is your professor and she was on our TV show recently.

DAVID: She's a terrific professor.

JASMIN: Excellent. I don't think the grades are in yet, so good job there. I know, but she is. And thank you so much for joining us today in Our Hen House, David.

DAVID: Thank you guys.

MARIANN: It was just enlightening.

JASMIN: It's really amazing to know that there's people like you out there and it gives me hope, so...

DAVID: Well, there's a lot of work to be done on this issue, so again if anybody wants to join our movement, check out GooseWatchNYC.com.

MARIANN: Yeah. I very much encourage anybody to do that.