

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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BIRD PROBLEMS AREN'T FUNNY

A shaving cream manufacturer once used terse jingles printed on signs tacked to fenceposts along highways for advertising. LISTEN BIRDS, one sequence read, THESE SIGNS COST MONEY. . . ROOST AWHILE. . . BUT DON'T GET FUNNY!

"If birds could read signs," Director Lynn Greenwalt of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said, "it would solve some horrendous problems we have throughout our country. How fine it would be if a NO TRESPASSING sign would protect a farmer's cornfield from blackbirds; or a DETOUR sign would shunt birds around airport runways; or an OFF LIMITS TO GULLS sign would save the remaining tern nesting colonies on an East Coast barrier island."

As it is, Fish and Wildlife Service scientists have spent years studying bird habits and populations in an effort to find effective, environmentally safe methods of reducing bird damage. Most of the techniques developed are designed to frighten birds away, but the Service has also conducted research on humane, selective methods of killing birds when it is necessary to reduce their numbers in local areas.

"We avoid it whenever possible but there are times when we have no alternative but to reduce bird populations," Greenwalt said. "That's a polite way of saying that we have to kill birds, often lots of birds. With our marvelous system of refuges, fish hatcheries, habitat restoration programs, and law enforcement activities, we sometimes like to think of ourselves as strictly a wildlife producing and protecting agency. However, there are many

instances where populations of some animals--including birds--must be controlled for their own good, for the good of other animals, or for the good of humans."

Actually, bird-control programs began with the earliest settlers. Blackbirds, which had always subsisted on insects and weed seeds, quickly turned to the far more convenient crops of the colonists. The depredations must have been serious. The Massachusetts Bay Colony established laws in 1667 requiring citizens to help reduce blackbird numbers. One law even withheld the marriage license of any single male until he had fulfilled his quota of six birds.

During the early spring when their numbers are at a low ebb, there are about 430 million blackbirds in the United States, according to annual surveys of winter roosts by the Fish and Wildlife Service. After nesting, their numbers more than double to 900 million. A typical flock contains about 40 percent red-winged blackbirds, 22 percent grackles, 20 percent starlings, 15 percent cowbirds, with the balance distributed among other species of blackbirds.

Large concentrations roost together in trees to share one another's body heat during the night. Sometimes their roosts are in towns where the incessant yammer of as many as one million birds in a small grove is a serious disturbance to the citizens. The accumulated guano left on the ground not only creates an untenable stench, but eventually kills the trees and--insidiously--forms a breeding place for the human disease, histoplasmosis.

Blackbirds also cause an estimated \$50 million in damage to corn, wheat, rice, cherries, grapes, sunflowers, and other crops throughout the country each year. Starlings flock into feedlots, polluting with their droppings the grain intended for fattening livestock.

These birds also cause problems for other wildlife. Starlings, which were introduced to the United States in the late 19th century, have multiplied rapidly and have taken over many nesting cavities, displacing native birds such as wood ducks, bluebirds, tree swallows, and woodpeckers. Grackles feed on the

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eggs and young of other birds and have caused considerable losses among white-winged doves in Texas. The female cowbird is a nest parasite, laying her eggs in the nests of other birds and letting the foster parents raise her large, robust young--usually at the expense of the rightful siblings. Cowbird parasitism has been especially hard on the Kirtland's warbler, an endangered species that nests only in one area in Michigan.

Blackbirds often can be driven from crops or roosting trees by persistent use of scare devices such as shotguns, propane cannons, firecrackers, or recorded bird-distress calls. Sometimes, however, these tactics merely transfer the problem elsewhere. Then the only alternative is to reduce the local blackbird population. One nonpoisonous and very selective method is to spray the blackbirds on cold nights when they are concentrated in roosting trees. The spray, PA-14, breaks down the oil in feathers, removing the birds' natural waterproofing and insulation, thus causing them to die of exposure. Spraying and other damage control methods are carefully carried out to insure that other species are not harmed.

Like blackbirds, gull populations have also rocketed to unprecedented numbers. And, similarly, their population explosion is related to human activities. Uncovered garbage dumps, the offal from fish-processing plants, and litter have given gulls seemingly unlimited food supplies--and they have flourished as never before.

Gulls have become a hazard at several airports and also have--like some of the blackbirds--encroached upon the traditional nesting grounds of other birds. Their most apparent inroads have been upon the terns on the barrier islands off the New England coast. About 1960, gulls invaded Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, an 8-mile-long island just below Cape Cod. Since then they have spread their own nesting colonies over almost the entire island, destroying the tern nesting colonies one by one until only a few tern colonies remain. Among the five species of terns represented is the roseate, a tern that is being considered for the endangered species list.

To protect Monomoy's terns, the Fish and Wildlife Service recently began a program to kill a limited number of gulls with DRC 1339, a poison that attacks the kidneys of birds, causing them to die painlessly in their sleep within 72 hours. Mixed with margarine and spread on pieces of bread, the poison bait is being placed in the nests of gulls that are encroaching on tern areas. Inasmuch as the gulls are garbage eaters, and the terns are not, the poison is selective and has been very successful so far. The Service is extremely careful to reduce the numbers of only the offending birds.

Though birds cause serious problems at times, they often are of incalculable value to farmers. Gulls kill locusts. Blackbirds kill weevils, earworms, and rootworm beetles. Grackles eat cutworms and mice in newly plowed fields. Cowbirds feed on insects that harass grazing livestock. Starlings feed on the notorious Japanese beetle.

"The trouble is," Greenwalt said, "they all come back to help harvest the crop. Our objectives are not primarily to kill gulls, blackbirds, or other animals, but to save the wild diversity of wildlife we enjoy so much, and at the same time save crops and livestock from needless waste."