# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release February 11, 1976 McGarvey 202/343-5634

## BLACKBIRD CONTROL AUTHORIZED IN KENTUCKY AND TENNESSEE

Blackbirds have returned by the millions to localized areas of Kentucky and Tennessee and Secretary of the Interior Thomas S. Kleppe has been empowered by Congress to authorize the treatment of roosts with chemicals registered for bird control purposes unless the treatment itself poses a hazard to humans.

Congress passed on January 28 an Act to provide for starling and blackbird control in Kentucky and Tennessee. President Ford signed the bill into law on February 4.

The bill waives the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act, or any other laws, for control actions undertaken in these two States before April 15, 1976.

Congress found that in Kentucky and Tennessee large concentrations of starlings, grackles, blackbirds, and other birds found in "blackbird roosts" pose a hazard to human health and safety, livestock, and agriculture. It further found that roosts are reestablished each winter and that dispersal techniques have been unsuccessful. Large concentrations of blackbirds produce droppings of 1 to 2 feet in depth under large roosts. This heightens the likelihood of humans contracting histoplasmosis--a serious infection of the trachea and bronchial tubes. Control, the bill stated,

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is most effective when birds are concentrated in winter roosts. Further, the bill pointed out, an emergency does exist which requires immediate action with insufficient time to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The bill provides that upon certification by the Governor of Kentucky or Tennessee to the Secretary of the Interior that "blackbird roosts" are a significant hazard to human health, safety, or property in his State, the Secretary of the Interior will survey roosts and authorize the treatment with chemicals registered for bird control purposes those roosts containing over 500,000 birds, unless the treatement itself would pose a hazard to human health, safety, or property.

The Fish and Wildlife Service survey of 1975 reports that there were about 77 million blackbirds in the States of Kentucky and Tennessee.

The blackbird/starling population in North America reaches a low point of about 250 million birds in late April to early May each year. By July, when the reproductive season terminates, the population has more than doubled to about 550 million birds. Between mid-July and the following April, over 300 million blackbirds/starlings die naturally, reducing the breeding population to the 250 million level of the previous breeding season. During the period of winter roosting (October-March), perhaps 200 million blackbirds/starlings die naturally.

The Fish and Wildlife Service breeding survey counts show that the breeding number of starlings and grackles have definitely increased over the last decade. Both starlings and grackles have benefited from land use changes caused by man.

The roosting population of blackbirds and starlings in the United States in January 1975 was estimated conservatively at 537 million birds located in 723 roosts. The population distribution was approximately 398 million in the East and 139 million in the West.

The national blackbird/starling roosting population in January 1975 was composed of 10 species in the following approximate proportions: 38 percent red-winged blackbirds, 20 percent starlings, 22 percent common grackles, 15 percent brown-head cowbirds, 2 percent Brewer's blackbirds, and a trace of rusty blackbirds; boat-tailed grackles, yellow-headed blackbirds, tri-colored red-winged blackbirds, and bronzed cowbirds. The last three species occur only in the West.

The 1974-75 survey classified natural habitats for blackbird and starling roosts into wetland and upland types. In the East, the majority of roosts were in deciduous thickets (41 percent) and conifers (34 percent). In the West, about one-half of all roosts were in marsh habitats. Upland roosts normally occurred in areas that supported intensive farming. Many roosting locations are traditional, but the precise sites used for roosting may change from year to year.

Although relatively small concentrations of blackbirds and starlings may winter in areas where sub-zero temperatures are encountered, the large concentrations are generally located in areas where winter temperatures are quite moderate. Thus, the birds concentrate in areas such as Kentucky and Tennessee each year at this time.

As a sidebar to this event it is interesting to note that one-fifth of today's "blackbird" problem was wrought by a nostalgic New Yorker who introduced starlings to Central Park from Europe.

In 1890 Eugene Scheifflin imported and released 60 starlings in New York City's Central Park, the first of several introductions. He and the others who imported starlings did so out of nostalgia for the familiar sight and sounds of the birds that they remembered from Europe. To them the starling was attractive.

The following year he released 40 more birds. From that hundred birds have come the vast millions of starlings that now threaten to overrun the country. All other starling importations, including one before 1850 and another to Portland, Oregon, failed.

The Portland Song Bird Club released 35 pairs of starlings in 1889 and 1892, but by 1901 or 1902 they had disappeared.

The starlings released in New York City apparently found their habitat desirable because they stayed in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island for about 9 years, but by 1900 they had arrived in New Haven, Connecticut, and by 1908 in eastern Massachusetts. By 1916 they had spread into Maine and Virginia. By 1939 the starling had moved north into Canada and had spread through Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and south into Mexico. By 1942 they had reached the Pacific slope, when a flock of 40 starlings were observed in Siskiyou County, California. Since that time starlings have been reported with increasing frequency and have appeared in even larger flocks on the West Coast. Before a starling population invades an area, the area typically gets a preliminary reconnaissance visit by a flock and several years later breeding and nesting activity begins there.

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