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SETTING UP AN EFFECTIVE URBAN BLACKBIRD ROOST CONTROL PROGRAM

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The City of Denton is situated 35 miles north of north-central Texas. This area is within one of the major N-S corridors for migratory birds. It is also far enough south so that winters are generally mild and open. The average rainfall of 30 inches sustains good stands of pecan and several species of oak, which serve as excellent roost sites for blackbirds.

For the past several years, summering flocks of blackbirds have chosen Denton as a roosting site. Interviews with oldtimers here indicate that flocks of birds have always been around. It is only in recent years that their numbers seem much greater and the resulting mess deeper. They also say that "in the old days" if flocks appeared and started creating a problem, they were simply shot with little fuss resulting. This method is not generally acceptable today.

The early part of summer 1975 marked my introduction to urban blackbird roosts. Our neighborhood was selected as a roost by starlings, grackles, and cowbirds. It rapidly became evident that no one on our local level was equipped to handle this mess. Eventually, some four months after I began looking for help, the Fish and Wildlife Animal Damage Control people from Fort Worth came to the rescue with a clow gun and distress signal campaign. The roost was dispersed within a week. In the following years, summering flocks of birds continued to return to roost in Denton. Our city made honest but sporadic attempts to disrupt the birds when citizen complaints demanded action.

The formation of a winter roost on the Texas Woman's University (TWU) campus this past November created a rotten situation in many ways. Attempts by unknowledgeable personnel using clow guns and distress signals were not effective. Our many live oak trees were being defoliated. Sidewalks, handrails, and everything else in the vicinity were being buried under bird excrement, and the 5,000 or so people on campus were sick of wading and slipping through it all.

The TWU Security then tried shooting. At this point I became directly associated in the roost dispersal efforts. I put together a volunteer army of faculty, staff, and students and organized a clow gun noise campaign. The campus roost was dispersed after six nights of effort.

With the continued support and encouragement of TWU, I have evolved from that eccentric lady with the bird stuff on her sneakers to the resident expert on urban bird roosts. I had the good fortune to confer this past summer with the Bird Damage Control group in Denver, Colorado. When I returned to Denton, I found that our summer roost had settled in as usual. The City officials finally asked for help. I responded by organizing and carrying out a cooperative noise campaign supported by TWU and the City of Denton. We successfully dispersed this summer roost within five days.

Overall we have dispersed three large, well-entrenched roosts. Two were summer roosts which were acted upon three and four months, respectively, after they had form-

ed. The winter roost on the campus of TWU was here about three months before we dispersed it. There were perhaps 80 to 100,000 birds in each roost. One-third of the birds in the winter roost were red-winged blackbirds: whereas, this species was not present in the summer roosts, which were made up of cowbirds, starlings, and grackles, both long-tailed and common. The winter roost on the TWU campus did not form elsewhere in the area: perhaps our action coincided with migratory movements. The two summer roosts were scattered, and the resulting smaller groups of birds were further harassed by the people who were having the problems.

For these well-defined and well-established roosts, we circled the area, assigned trained shooters to strategic stations, and shot the clow guns at approaching birds for five or six consecutive evenings. We used taped red-winged blackbird distress signals, which were amplified through a police vehicle sound system. Adequate supplies of clow guns and ammunition were on hand before shooting commenced. Each gun was checked and cleaned nightly. Detailed records of all activities were maintained throughout the campaigns. Back-up support of the police was requested. Their visibility was helpful in lessening citizen complaints about the noise. Follow-up procedures involved the continued observation of the roost area, advising citizens how to clean up their property, and answering calls from a new group of citizens whose trees had been adopted as an alternate roost by the dispersed birds.

Thus far our local efforts have been in dispersal rather than prevention of urban blackbird roosts. Thinning and cutting back of the roost trees is generally too expensive for most citizens. A vivid example of the effectiveness of this method appeared on our campus last winter when one of our large live oaks was pruned on one side before our noise campaign began. The birds avoided the opened side and used only the untrimmed sections. Trimming and thinning of potential roost trees appear to be the most effective approach, if it is economically feasible.

We have not had the time to test other methods, such as rubber snakes or owls, but these have been effective in discouraging pockets of birds, according to many people who have contacted us. A device called a "Garden Monster," which consists of black, corrugated-plastic streamers, is effective in keeping birds from entering a semi-closed atrium in the new tower administration building on the TWU campus.

A more economical approach than clow guns for the dispersal of a small flock or pocket of roosting blackbirds was tried this summer. The taped distress calls of the red-winged blackbird were used to turn and disperse four separate roosts, which were confined to a few large trees in each case. A portable outfit was put together from surplus supplies: a phonograph speaker, an amplifier, and a tape recorder. This operates on household current. The speaker is positioned under the roost trees face-up on the ground. A long lead from the speaker to the amplifier allows us to set up at the edge of the yard rather than under the roost trees. The distress call tape is turned on as the first birds come into view. Full volume, maximum treble, and no bass are most effective in keeping the birds moving on beyond their usual roosting sites. The tape is stopped when no birds are approaching. Closer to sunset the major portion of the birds try to enter the roost, so the tape is run almost continuously for perhaps 15 minutes until all have gone to roost elsewhere. The noise campaign was run for three consecutive evenings and was effective in breaking the birds' roosting behavior in each case.

In two of the four roosts, the use of the taped calls alone was sufficient to disrupt and move the birds. The other two roosts required both the tape and loud, intermittent noises resembling a gunshot. Using shot-type noises was necessary the first evening and to lesser degrees the following two evenings. These noises can be easily made with many things, such as clapping two flexible boards together, banging garbage can lids or old pots and pans. Two of the easiest methods have been hitting an old metal realtors' sign with a rubber mallet and banging on a section of corrugated-metal roofing with a stout stick.

Grackles were generally the first of the three species (grackles, cowbirds, and starlings) to arrive at the roost each evening. The taped red-winged blackbird distress calls did not seem to affect their behavior immediately, and they settled into the tops of the trees. As cowbirds and starlings approached, the amplified distress calls caused most of them to change their direction. This action usually flushed the few grackles also.

What has gradually emerged from all this struggle is a picture of a workable program for urban blackbird roost control. We have determined the basic elements needed for an effective municipally-run control program:

1. Hire An Expert to Head Up the Bird Control Work. Traditionally this has been someone in the local sanitation department, someone who is generally overworked, underpaid, and understaffed. In our particular situation, city garbage collectors were used to fire the clow guns, paid overtime, and really not suited to do the job correctly. Some did not understand English; others were more intent trying to shoot the chimney swifts out of the sky, and still others were busy impressing their girlfriends.

It is far more economical to hire a half- or full-time expert Bird Control Officer than to gear-up haphazardly each time a blackbird roost emerges in the community. Ideally, the Officer should have talent in organizing a group of people and committing them to the task. That person must enjoy working with people, since roosts constitute as much a people problem as a bird problem. The Officer should also be able to create good, positive support in the community through use of the newspapers, TV and radio, talking with civic groups, school classes, etc. The Officer would then take the necessary steps in dispersing the roost. He will be successful only if he has complete control. Administrative interference must be minimized.

2. Define the Roost. This should include the area involved; species composition; behavior, such as flight directions, feeding and staging areas; and weather conditions. An in-depth study of the characteristics of each roost is essential. Comprehensive field notes must be taken and maintained. This step will provide the foundations for an effective roost dispersal program.

3. Personal Contact With Residents in the Roost Area. While the birds are being observed and the roost is being defined, this is also the time to meet the people beneath the roost. Most all of them will be highly motivated to lend their support in varied ways. They should be informed as to the various facets of the problem and given the history of urban bird roost problems. Some of these citizens will be able to contribute their own observations, which can be added to the total picture of the roost. Other people can be helpful by spreading the word to their neighborhood and gaining their support. An effective and successful roost dispersal program is directly related to the degree of unanimity in the neighborhood. There will always be a few individuals who will be apathetic or obstructive. I have found that the majority of our citizens are pleased, surprised, and grateful for any attention and assistance they can get. The time I have spent talking with our people who have had the worst problems with roosting birds has been extremely informative and profitable.

4. Generate Public Interest and Support. Contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, local department of parks and wildlife, county extension people, Humane Society, Audubon Society, health departments, civic and service organizations, public schools, colleges and universities, law enforcement agencies, fire departments- even the mail carriers. There are people within all these groups who can not only support dispersal efforts, but who can also supply helpful information or services. Talk with anyone who will listen. Be available to call on people and talk with them personally. Use the media. Involve the community; put volunteers to work; take suggestions offered for controlling the roost. Individuals from hundreds of miles away offered their suggestions of how to chase birds, thanks to television and a Texas State publication containing an article on our roost problem.

5. Maintain an Information Directory. Keep an index of names of those people or groups who can lend consultative support. Include names, addresses, and telephone numbers of existing and potential contributors to the situation. List information of companies producing sound equipment and electronically-produced noise, also those that sell pyrotechniques. Keep a complaint logbook. If this is kept up-dated, it can serve as the basis for reporting required of the Officer and for the location of subsequent dispersal attempts.

6. Organize and Initiate the Roost Dispersal. Dispersal efforts will be determined by the extent of the roost area, the length of time it has been active, the characteristics of the people living and working in the area, the numbers of workers available to help dispersal efforts, and the amount of money available to support noise campaigns. The Officer decides whether to conduct a dispersal program featuring clow guns and/or other loud noise source. Determine the number of shooters required; place them at strategic location with pre-shoot training. It is most important to use trained and knowledgeable personnel who will know when and how to shoot; decide the duration of the campaign; check the guns and ammunition nightly; set up a mobile unit which can cruise the area to check each shooting station and to supply additional shots. Liability aspects also must be thoroughly understood by all workers.

7. Follow the Dispersed Birds. The objective is to move roosting birds into areas where they will not constitute a problem to humans. Thus far, we have managed to keep the most recently dispersed summer roost in much smaller pockets and in places which seem to be more acceptable to the citizens.

8. Publish the Successful Noise Campaign of Roost Dispersal. This tactic serves two purposes. One, local participants appreciate being recognized for their efforts, especially in newspapers, which assures their continued support for the program. Two, copy by the newsmedia in surroundng communities creates an awareness of a workable solution and identifies people that they can contact to help them establish a successful program.

9. Set Up a Central Source of Distress Call Tapes and Recordings. Copies of these should be available at a local library, police station, Chamber of Commerce, etc. Full instructions should be included for proper use. If a resident has a bird roost problem, he gets the tape and plays it. Thus he has initiated his own successful bird dispersal program.

10. Maintain an On-Going Roost Dispersal Program. Keep at roost dispersal on a year-round basis. Anticipate future roost establishments. Take prompt action once a roost begins to form. Municipalities which have hired a Bird Control Officer whose sole responsibility will be the disruption and prevention of urban blackbird roosts should be able to resolve successfully the major bird vs. man problem. It is far more efficient to attack this continuing problem from day-to-day than to allow a roost to form. To disperse an established roost requires far more time, effort, and money.

It is hoped that this initial program, which we have begun at TWU and in the City of Denton, will lead to further study of the movements of large numbers of blackbirds and to the continued successful management of roost sites in our urban areas.

SUMMARY

1 An urban winter bird roost, consisting of 80 to 100,000 red-winged blackbirds, cowbirds, starlings, and grackles and covering approximately 100 acres on a university campus, was successfully dispersed using the clow gun method for six nights.

2. An urban summer bird roost, consisting of approximately the same number of birds but no red-winged blackbirds and covering the same amount of acreage in a residential area, was successfully dispersed using the clow gun method for six nights.

3. A method using amplified red-winged blackbird distress calls three consecutive nights was successful at four different sites of one acre or less to disperse summer roosts of blackbirds in residential areas.

4. The protocol for a successful urban blackbird roost dispersal program is discussed.

DISCUSSION

Q: How frequently are the shots set off?

A: Whenever a large group of birds appeared. I think the first evening of treatment is the crucial one. That first evening of treatment, as the first groups of birds approached the roost area, I turned the thing on and gave them a dose of the distress signals. Then, if they persisted in entering, I went "Bang." This also reinforces the use of the tape. By the third evening, I didn't have to use any of the shot-type noises. I was moving perhaps 33,000 birds with the set-up I had.

Q: Where do they go?

A: We're trying to just get them into areas where they're not creating problems in residential areas or business or whatever.

Q: What if they went downstate to your neighbors?

A: You keep moving them till you get them to an area where they're not going to be creating the problem. This is the theory we're using. We're not trying to get rid of them, we're just putting them in places where they're not creating problems.

Q: Can shot noises be replaced by loud noises?

A: Yes, by tradition, this is also an effective way. If you have the strength to get out there before sunset and bang on something, you normally can keep them at least from roosting in your trees. But on the municipal level you've got to have somebody who can handle that sort of thing. There are too many people in a community who are incapable of doing it themselves, like in our area where the potential for problems exists.

Q: How persistent did you have to be? How many nights did it take?

A: Three nights for a small roost of 2-3000 birds in one complex. A larger roost, when you're dealing with 100,000 birds, is going to take longer. In our cases, the three roosts took five days. They are too well attached by the time they're allowed to sit for three months.

Q: Is it a summer roost or a winter roost?

A: Due to our open winters, we have summer and winter roosts, so I can work all year round. In winter, we have about one-third redwings; in summer we have cowbird, starling, and grackle mixtures. We have trimmed the trees. We have a lot of live oaks, which have leaves all year round; and the birds were using those trees last winter. The roost on campus was so bad the leaves were coming off the trees. We are trimming as we go, and this is very effective. We can't recommend this to the general public; they can't afford it. It is too expensive a procedure, but it does work. Of course, if you cut your trees down, your problem is gone.