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BLACKBIRDS - DEPREDAATION,  
RESEARCH AND CONTROL IN OHIO  
AND THE MIDWEST

Thomas M. Stockdale  
Ohio State University

## BLACKBIRDS - DEPREDEATION, RESEARCH AND CONTROL IN OHIO AND THE MIDWEST

THOMAS M. STOCKDALE, Extension Wildlife Specialist, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

The earliest settlers in Ohio and the Midwest suffered losses to birds. First it was animal losses to birds of prey, then crop losses to passenger pigeons. Today it is blackbirds! In 1900, F. E. L. Beal conducted an analysis of the digestive tracts of blackbirds collected in the Midwest and found that the preferred food in the summer months was soft seeds. A similar study which I conducted on redwinged blackbirds in 1959 showed that 90% of their diet was composed of soft seeds, primarily milk and dough stage corn during the late summer and early fall. Presently we estimate that we have an annual loss of \$15 million to crop depredating birds in Ohio.

The other states in the Midwest report similar losses. In Michigan, grain crops, fruits and berries are heavily damaged. In Ontario, Canada grain crops, and particularly corn, are hard hit in some areas. And, of course, we are all familiar with the losses in rice in the Mississippi Valley and especially in Arkansas.

Shortly after World War II farmers in Northern Ohio were sustaining a gradually increasing amount of damage to corn by blackbirds, primarily redwings. In a survey of 555 corn growers in Ottawa County, Ohio in 1957, conducted by my predecessor and the county agent, it was determined that 75,000 bushels of corn were lost to blackbirds. At the government support price of \$1.45 per bushel at that time, this amounted to a loss of \$110,000.

This damage was generally limited to areas within a few miles of the Lake Erie - Sandusky Bay shoreline. In fact, I witnessed some of this early damage having grown up in this area and awaking on summer mornings to the sound of shotguns, fire crackers and other devices being used to scare blackbirds from corn fields. A common practice in this area at that time was to burn marshes in an effort to eliminate blackbird roosting sites.

This problem had reached sufficient magnitude that in 1957 the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station (now the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center) decided to initiate a study of this problem. There is a substation of the OARDC located on the shore of Sandusky Bay in Western Erie County and this study was centered there. Work in the late 1950's focused on methods of baiting and poisoning blackbirds, the testing of scaring devices including recorded distress cries, trials of bird resistant varieties of corn, and basic studies of nesting and food habits as previously mentioned. This work was under the leadership of Dr. Maurice L. Giltz with the cooperation of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The early 1960's witnessed increased damage in the area in North central Ohio. Damage was occurring to distances of 15-20 miles inland from marsh roosts and there were reports of new damage areas in other parts of the state. Such areas were always within a few miles of suitable redwing roosting sites near water. These new areas included the Apple Creek - Kill buck Valleys in NE Ohio (Holmes - Wayne County), the Buckeye Lake vicinity, South Charleston, and the Whitewater Valley in SW Ohio.

Groups of corn growers in these areas began to meet to discuss their common problem and to demand help. There was talk of circulating petitions and organizing motorcades to the state capitol. Research continued with emphasis placed on scaring devices. The decoy trap was developed as a research tool and thousands of blackbirds were trapped, banded and released again in an effort to learn more about their movement patterns. A nesting survey was conducted in 1964 and it was determined the largest number of our locally raised redwings were being produced in alfalfa fields. There were five times as many nests per acre in alfalfa than there were in cattail marshes. Roost surveys indicated an explosion in the redwing population.

Groups of corn growers in the Hebrdn and South Charleston areas were showing signs of loose organization by the fall of 1964. In an attempt to direct the efforts of these groups into useful channels, assistance was given to them to strengthen their organizations. They were involved in field trials and they in turn provided some of the materials and manpower for these field trials. Excellent cooperation existed between our research project and these small groups in 1965; however, corn growers, especially those in Northern Ohio, were beginning to get very restless. It became increasing more difficult for them to understand

why we had not solved their problem. Talk of petitions had started again.

A meeting was planned for early September 1965 in which the top blackbird research people from all over the country would discuss this problem with local farmers. Over 400 farmers gathered at the Townsend Local School and the Dean of our College of Agriculture opened the meeting. About two hours later, after all aspects of the problem were discussed, the floor was opened for questions. Many heated comments followed, "the pot had come to a boil". There was open antagonism to researchers expressed and everyone, especially the administrators, left knowing that more had to be done. Finally the many small voices of the corn growers became one big voice and that voice had been heard.

Following this meeting, two new groups emerged in Ohio. The farmers of Northern Ohio organized to form the Bye-Bye Blackbird Association and in December of 1965 the Coordinating Committee for the Control of Depredating Birds was formed. This first group embraced seven counties and at last report had over 300 members.

Bill Nelson of the Division of Wildlife Services, U.S.F. & W.S. was invited to meet with a group on December 15, 1965 in Columbus to discuss what his agency could do to help us. After a very fruitful evening, it was decided to organize the CCCDB. This coordinating committee was composed of the Dean of the College of Agriculture, the Director of the State Department of Agriculture, research and extension personnel, representatives of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Ohio Division of Wildlife, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, plus key people from agri-business and representatives from each of the organized blackbird control groups.

The purpose of the group is to coordinate the blackbird research and control activities in the State of Ohio. It is divided into four sub-committees: The Legislative Action Sub-committee; the Research Sub-committee; the Control Sub-committee; and the Education Sub-committee. Dean Simeral, Associate Director of Public Affairs for the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, was elected permanent chairman of this committee and I was elected secretary.

The sub-committees immediately went to work. The Legislative Action Sub-committee's principle function is to work with both the State and Federal legislatures to obtain additional funds for research and control. In 1966 they were successful in obtaining \$25,000. The Research and Control Sub-committees work closely together and in 1966 they worked on population reduction means and initiated a damage estimate survey. The function of the Education Sub-committee is obvious. We continue to acquaint the people with the need for this program and its progress.

Two major accomplishments resulted from the 1966 program. First, the regional nature of our problem has become more evident with concrete evidence now that there is a steady flow of blackbirds back and forth across Lake Erie via the island chain throughout the summer. Second, we must have more accurate loss estimates translated into dollars if we ever expect to impress elected representatives. If there was a third accomplishment, it was the public relations value derived from an increased educational effort.

We now have more accurate loss estimates than we have ever had before. These resulted from three surveys. One of these was conducted by the County Agent in Sandusky County and the Bye-Bye Blackbird Association and it reflected an average loss of 16.6 per cent of the corn crop which projected to the total corn crop of the county would be a loss of \$866,000. This loss includes direct loss to birds plus secondary losses from insects, mold and sprouting plus the cost of control methods employed. A field survey of 1 to 2 per cent of the corn acreage in each of 8 counties was conducted last year to determine the extent of direct loss to birds. This survey was then followed by a mailed questionnaire to all 13,000 plus farmers in these same eight counties. The results of this mailed survey will be compared to the field survey results as soon as they are all tabulated. Over 25 per cent of these questionnaires have been returned and early tabulations reflect a loss of over \$1 million to grain. This figure does not include costs in time and equipment for scaring.

We now have the dollar loss figures which we need. Increased emphasis will be placed on efforts at the Federal level in 1967. Research will continue and will be under the leadership of Dr. Larry Holcomb who joined the staff of the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center late last summer.

Plans for 1967 are still incomplete but they include a North American Conference on Blackbird Depredation in Agriculture to be held in Columbus, Ohio on March 30 and 31, 1967.

We in Ohio recognize that we have a serious problem and we are ready and willing to cooperate with anyone on the solution of this problem.