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STARLING CONTROL IN SONOMA COUNTY

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The European Starling, Sturnus vulgaris, began the invasion of California from the north and east as early as the late 1930's. In the winter of 1954, 20,000 of these birds were reported spending the winter in or near the Sonoma, Mendocino Coast. Then in 1961, Walter Ball, at that time the Chief of the Bureau of Rodent and Weed Control in Sacramento, in a talk to the Agricultural Commissioners at the Spring Convention, stated Starlings had been reported from nearly every section of California. In reviewing Walter Ball's paper given at that time, it is somewhat surprising how accurately the predictions he made have come true.

It was about this time that we in Sonoma County began to observe Starlings nesting in Oak trees in the Santa Rosa Plains. So in cooperation with the State Department of Agriculture and the University of California at Davis, we began a small trapping and banding program, but mostly observation and study. It soon became apparent that we were faced with two different situations; the migrating Starling and the resident population.

Migration of Starlings into the County commences towards the end of October. Many, many thousands of birds will begin moving into our area. However, as early as September 1st, flocks of Starlings will suddenly appear in the vicinity of our vineyards.

These September flocks are rather small in size from several dozen to several hundred birds. They appear to be very thorough and persistent in scouting and testing ripening wine grapes. Through years of observations we have good reason to believe that these birds, and especially resident Starlings, will act as decoys and call in later arriving migrants.

Then about the 1st of March, they move North. However, many thousands still decide that they like the area to live in and nest. We were finding that they were nesting in woodpecker holes in Oak trees and could be the real trouble makers to our crops. If not controlled, they could cost our farmers untold damage.

At the request of the Farm Bureau in 1964, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution instructing the Agricultural Commissioner to take whatever action necessary to control and suppress the European Starling.

The birds were usually nesting in trees adjacent to dairies where there was an abundant supply of high protein food for their young. Both sexes were observed making very frequent trips from manure piles in fields to the nests. It was also found that each pair had at least two and some had three hatches during the spring consisting of five to seven birds in each hatch.

The news media of the County gave a great deal of publicity to the problem; so the public was well aware of the hazards of these birds when control methods were started. Not having a great deal of experience in controlling Starlings at that time and finding that only certain areas were being invaded, the County started a shooting program to control the adult birds. Some of the inspectors became excellent marksmen and the adult population was kept to a minimum; much was learned about preferred nesting areas in Sonoma County.

Also, modified Australian Crow Traps were put into use and it was soon learned that the young fledglings could be readily trapped if_the traps were placed in the proper areas using good decoys and abundant cull fruit to attract the young birds. However, these trapped birds also provided a ready meal for any predator in the area and as soon as the predators started killing the trapped birds, the trap immediately became useless until the harasser was captured. In many cases, the nervous and injured decoys will have to be removed and replaced by new decoys.

We purchased live Havahart traps and placed out with each Australian Crow Trap. When the animals were caught, they were either destroyed or relocated in other areas of the county. These predators mainly consisted of cats, foxes, skunks, coons, hawks and other small animals. Also, despite the information given out by the news media, we ran into the

problem of man predators. We have had traps completely destroyed "by ax," traps upended and holes cut in the wire by individuals that believed we were out to exterminate the species.

We have found that by keeping the resident Starlings under control, the resident birds are actually on the decrease; by the 4th to 5th year a noticeable decline of resident nesting adults was apparent. The attrition losses of the adult birds may be attributed to this factor.

In studies by Brina Kessel, she found that under natural and unmolested conditions, at least 93% of birds fledged in one locale usually returned to nest within one mile of their original nesting site. So control of these resident juveniles is absolutely necessary if one is to keep the future population at a minimum.

We have been experimenting with different types of poison baits; mainly, D.R.C. 1339. We have used this on every type of material imaginable; however, we have not yet convinced ourselves that this is a good method of controlling the Starling.

At the present time, we are using 10 modified crow traps which are 6' x 8' in size and we have one large trap mounted on a trailer which is 8' x 20'. This spring we are purchasing another large trailer so we shall have two such mobile traps in operation.

We have found that when we find damage being done or spot a large infestation of birds, we can readily move these large trailers into the area and normally within a week, we can capture practically all the young fledglings.

In operating these traps, we have to be very particular and careful that the trapped birds that we do have in the cages are readily cared for. We hire a student in early summer and throughout the summer his job is to feed and water the birds that are trapped and take the excess and dispose of them.

For the past several years we have supplied the University of California at Davis quite a number of birds for research work. We also have several farmers that have taken the plans of the modified Australian Crow Trap and have built traps of their own. However, these we check normally at least once a week to make sure they are operating it properly and feeding and watering the birds even though we are going to dispose of them eventually. We don't want them to just starve to death in the traps or die from neglect.

This past year I think was one of our most successful years of operation. During the entire summer, we did not receive one single call of damage to the grape vineyards. One inspector plus the student have been placed in charge of this operation. He has been working with the problem long enough that he can readily find the best and proper place to put the trap and also as soon as it becomes inactive or slows down, he moves the trap into other locations. It is very imperative that the man in charge of the operation of Starling control is completely knowledgeable of the subject so that he can move these traps and readily know where they will do the most good.

We have found that the proper placing of a trap can pull the Starlings in from a 5 mile radius within the area of the trap. By proper management and placing, the damage can be control led.

We have also experimented with sound devices and have had varying success. We have tried the carbide guns and the exploding firecrackers; however, we have found in each case, especially with the zon guns, the birds become use to the noise and when the explosion occurs, they may rise but they settle immediately back down onto the grapes. With the exploding firecrackers, almost the same thing occurs. They do move when the firecracker goes off; however, they only move to another end of the field or within a few moments have settled back down on the grapes that they were feeding upon.

We have recently tried the Av-alarm system and have had excellent success. However, this last summer we placed the Av-alarm on 17 acres which was adjacent to the city of Santa Rosa. One day I received a phone call from the District Attorney informing me that he had a petition signed by surrounding residents complaining of noise pollution. We had to relocate the Av-alarm, turn it away from the houses which were close by, turn the volume down to as low as possible, but still maintain good control. As a result, the individual was still able to harvest almost a complete crop from that 17 acres of vineyard.

We intend to do more work with sound devices to make sure that they do work throughout the year. Although we have no feedlots in our County, we find that they are excellent for control of the birds during the feeding operations and this entire system seems very worthwhile and could prove very effective in the future.

At the present time, even though we are conducting a favorable program in our County for control of these birds, we realize that there is an awful lot of work yet to be done. We strongly recommend that different industries such as the Wine Institute, The Cherry Growers Association and related industries should provide grants to the University for continued study of the control of the Starling. Also, that there should be a ready supply of decoys available each spring when work is commenced. It is very difficult for a single county to maintain strong decoys throughout the winter. We have had excellent cooperation from the University of California at Davis in supplying us with excellent decoys to start our program each year.

I think also we need more research for roost control sprays where we may be able to go in and dispose of large numbers of these birds without endangering other types of species or the environment within the area. I realize that we will constantly and continually have problems from different environmental groups when we expose sprays or baits but the damage that these birds can do to the crops within the state of California are tremendous. We are going to have to put ourselves on the line to help our farmers so that they can still produce crops to make a living and feed the population.

When we look at the millions of birds that overwinter in California, we may think it is an impossible task to control them. We have found this is untrue so far. What the future may bring is hard to say; however, the trapping program in our County has proven very successful.

Our program in Sonoma County is going to definitely continue. We will use any method that is proven safe and satisfactory and again we must rely on the University of California for information and research. I cannot stress this strongly enough,that in all bird control work, continued research is an absolute must and control work is not easy but can be accomplished.