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BIRD CONTROL IN MILWAUKEE : A CASE HISTORY

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The City of Milwaukee Health Department has been engaged in some degree of nuisance bird control activity for more than thirty years. Early attempts at bird control consisted of using fireworks, rubber snakes, paper mache owls, and other devices to prevent starling roosting. All met with very limited success and were eventually abandoned.

Until the post World War II period, Milwaukee, like most large cities, was plagued by an abundance of homeless pigeons. Pigeons were abundant on downtown streets, commercial roof tops, and in parks where they were fed by well-meaning citizens. Vending machines dispensing pigeon foods were placed by entrepeneurs at many inviting locations.

The first requests to the Health Department for pigeon control came from the City Attorney's Office. As Assistant City Attorney was feeding pigeons on the broad window ledges of the City Hall and, thereby, creating a nuisance to the remainder of the City Attorney's staff. Baiting at the window ledges with thallium treated corn abated the nuisance.

The success in this venture led us to plan for a city-wide pigeon control program. The demonstrated presence of *cryptococcus neoformans* in accumulated pigeon droppings, the presence of *ornithosis* in pigeon flocks, and the recognized nuisances caused by the flocking and roosting habits of these birds provided a public health rationale for attempting control.

In planning a city-wide pigeon control program, many problems must be considered to conduct such a program safely and efficiently.

The first problem to be considered was the choice of bait and pesticide. Although inherently dangerous, thallium sulfate was utilized in the early stages of the program because it was readily available and had been proven effective as an avicide. Strychnine sulfate replaced thallium at a later date as being biodegradable, and having Federal registration for this purpose. Observation of the feeding habits of pigeons was necessary to select a suitable bait. Although park pigeons would eat bread crumbs and bird seed when fed by the public, these foods were not acceptable in other areas.

It was found that the major feeding source was spilled grain along railroad right-of-ways and marshalling yards. Whole corn was found to be an acceptable bait under almost all circumstances. It is interesting to note that the pesticide adhering to the corn caused the kernels to be an off-color rendering them unacceptable to pigeons. This was counterfaced by adding a yellow vegetable dye to the formulation to restore the natural color to the corn.

In the early stages of the program, some poisoned bread and bird seed were used to clear pigeons from parks. This was done only under continual observation with the uneaten bait being removed immediately after feeding.

The major part of the pigeon baiting program is conducted in railroad yards and on flat roofs of industrial and commercial buildings. Church steeples are often infested, and provide a safe baiting location. These areas are not frequented by non-target species and hazard to humans and pets is minimal.

When complaints of pigeon nuisances are received from residential areas, baiting is done only after a survey is completed to determine whether baiting can be done safely. An elevated flat roof, broad window ledge, upper porch, or other safe feeding place must be present. The presence of children and pets is also considered. If these conditions are met, the occupant of the residence is provided with unpoisoned whole corn and instructed to try to establish a feeding pattern in the nuisance birds. If a feeding habit can be established, a Pest Control Sanitarian returns to the premises and places poisoned corn. In most cases the nuisance birds are successfully eliminated.

The use of whole corn as a bait has precluded ingestion by smalled protected species of birds. Careful selection of baiting areas and proper bait placement has permitted this program to operate without incident since its inception.

Several attempts have been made to find less hazardous methods for controlling pigeons. One such method was the experimental use of Endrin or Fenthion treated absorbent roosts. This proved to be unsuccessful and was discarded when the pesticides failed to kill caged pigeons after five days exposure to pesticide soaked cage floors. Another experimental substance tried was Tribromoethanol, an anesthetic sold for human use under the trade name of Avertin. In field use, this material did not produce sufficient anasthetic effect to permit any significant reduction in pigeon flocks. Anesthetized birds were prone to fly off when disturbed by traffic noises or other disturbances and were found to recover rapidly. The costs of using this material, including the manpower requirements, were prohibitive.

Several procedural changes have been required by the tightening restrictions of State and Federal pesticide regulations. The use of Thallium was voluntarily discontinued before it was banned by State regulation. For the past two years, strychnine has been classified by the State of Wiscons in as a “use by permit only” pesticide. The Milwaukee Health Department has been fortunate to receive a general permit from the State for the use of strychnine in pigeon control within the city limits at any time. We must, however, make monthly reports to the District Game Warden of the location of all pigeon control bait placements and the quantity used in each placement.

Although Milwaukee is not free of pigeons, one no longer sees flocks of pigeons inhabiting our parks nor are pigeons found bumming handouts on city streets. By perseverance and continuous control efforts, Milwaukee's pigeon population has been reduced to manageable proportions.

The control of Starlings has not been as successful as pigeon control in Milwaukee. Although our problem is minimal and is confined to tree roosting

in relatively small areas, the complaints of citizens affected are vociferous. Our only partially successful control procedure to date has been to play an amplified Starling distress cry. The treatment must usually be given on several successive evenings in order to repell the Starlings from the area. This form of control is not particularly popular with the citizens as we temporarily produce a greater nuisance than the Starlings, and abatement of the problem cannot be guaranteed.

We have obtained an experimental permit to use the wetting agent, Tergitol, for Starling control. Up to this point, our efforts have been unsuccessful. By the time the climatic conditions are optimum for its use, most of the Starlings have migrated to warmer climates. In addition, leaves have not fallen from the roosting trees at the times the Starlings remain rendering it difficult to accomplish thorough wetting of the birds. Our score to date is two Starlings and one protected Mourning Dove. Hopefully, we will continue experimental use of Tergitol, climatic conditions permitting, with the hope that it might become a useful tool in Starling control.