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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SUCCESSFUL BLACKBIRD ROOST MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: The public relations aspects of a successful blackbird roost management program for an urban area are described. Appendices include sample field note format, selected bird control references, a method for preserving birds, bird control materials, and a sample citation form.

There is a saying "Animals are such agreeable friends: They ask no questions, pass no criticisms." However, when one encounters urban blackbird roosts, our agreeable feathered friends might not pass criticisms, but they most assuredly pass something else. Obviously, an urban bird control program should be initiated if the roost problems are a continuing nuisance in the area.

Texas Woman's University and the City of Denton, Texas have been jointly concerned for the past three years in an urban bird control program. The evolution of this program into an economical and successful one has been due in large measure to good public relations. What methods, procedures or approaches have been successful? I will describe what has been effective in establishing good public relations for the support of a vigorous and successful bird control program on our campus and in our community.

We do not have bird problems, we have people problems. The success I have is due to managing people first, then managing the birds second. The one-to-one, personal contact between the citizen and myself is always primary. I meet with them, take whatever time is needed to hear their complaints, then show them how their particular problem is associated with regional or national problems. I empathize with them regardless of the magnitude of their problem. What might be a minor nuisance, or no nuisance to most people, can be a major problem to others. There will be those who think a few random bird droppings constitute a menace, or consider a squawking pair of nesting birds disruptive to their well-being. Whatever the complaint is, each situation is given the same concern. I have repeatedly demonstrated that if one takes the necessary time to work directly with the citizen and his bird problem, one will be successful. Direct citizen contact appears to be the most important aspect for the successful operation of an urban bird control program, whether in Denton, Texas or anywhere in the world.

There must be one person who initiates, manages and directs the urban bird control program. As soon as additional responsibilities are given to that person, aside from bird control, the program will lose its effectiveness.

It has been said "If you want something done, go to the top." I have met with the President of Texas Woman's University and members of her administration, the Denton City Council, and administrators in our city government. Everyone is aware of the roost problem which presented from the human health and legal aspects needs little commentary to convince decision makers that imminent action is necessary. Therefore, an outline of my proposals with supporting facts and figures was given to these people before our meeting.

Once the program was underway, I enlisted the services or support of individuals or departments from the University and the City. A detailed monthly report is sent to the City Manager and the Texas Woman's University President. Separate contractual agreements describing my responsibilities in generalized terms are signed by the concerned parties. The generalized terms of the agreements then allow me to act with dispatch and economy whenever a problem materializes. There is subsequently no need to "go through channels"; therefore, I am able to act promptly.

Earning the continuing support and respect of the leaders in the University and the community is an on-going and integral part of our program. I have been able to render a service based on the most current methods available, plus devise my own methods suited to our needs. There has been minimal interference in the projects which I conducted. I was given the independence to plan and execute the bird control method which I recommended.

The newspapers, radio and television have played an important role in the success of my programs. These people become converts to the cause of urban bird control if just before sunset they tour the roost and are subjected to the occupational hazards of roost dispersal work. There is no better way to show the need for bird control to anyone than to let the individual become the target of incoming, defecating birds, to choke upon the pervading stench, or to be overtaken by the flies, fleas, ticks and chiggers associated with our Texas roosts. The ensuing news story might not be as accurate as you would wish; nevertheless it will be intensely reported. For some reason, man against bird makes news.

Criteria that I have found essential in conducting a successful urban bird roost control program cover several areas. I have briefly cited these areas as:

- A. Family
The understanding and support of family members allow the program director to forge ahead.
- B. Program Director Attributes
 1. Being sufficiently optimistic to assume that nothing is impossible.
 2. Having enough humility to say "I don't know", but having enough perception to find out.
 3. Having a good sense of humor to sustain myself when I am out in the field and might well appear foolish or downright silly.
 4. Exhibiting patience, sometimes called stubbornness.
 5. Being persistent, also referred to as being a nag.
 6. Learning by doing; in other words, avoid making the same mistake twice.
 7. Being quietly attentive most of the time and listening to the comments of others.
 8. Showing empathy for others, or putting myself in their place.
 9. Possessing a willingness to cope with sceptics or cynics and showing that they were wrong; but in a way so that they feel it was their own doing.

C. Actions

1. Trying not to over-react to a situation.
2. Planning an interval between time of complaint and action.
3. Testing procedures, running equipment before "going public".
4. Considering the worst possible results stemming from any action I might take and covering such areas as injury, legal action, new complaints and harassment.
5. Keeping records. The who, what, when, where and why for every contact I make.
6. Maintaining a telephone log.
7. Writing detailed field notes on methods, procedures, weather conditions, observations, etc. (Appendix 1).
8. Making and keeping duplicate copies of everything written.

D. Specific Public Relations

1. One must be familiar with the bird control literature and those individuals, agencies and institutions involved in urban bird management problems and their possible solutions (Appendix 2). I feel that a large part of the unsuccessful programs other cities undertake is that they do not know where to find the proper information and expertise. This results in a waste of time and taxpayer's money which is intolerable and will make future programs difficult, if not impossible, to initiate.
2. Anticipate opposition from various groups. I have joined them, supported them financially, spoken at their meetings and found them ready to support rather than oppose my efforts. Proper communication with all concerned citizens is essential to the success of any public program.
3. Assume there are people in the area who will provide goods, services or other support free, and appeal to their public-spirited natures.
4. Spread the word. I have spoken to service organizations, school groups, private citizens, neighborhood groups, retired citizens, Scouts, as well as participating in urban bird control meetings and animal control personnel workshops.
5. Assemble a "Show and Tell" collection of preserved birds (Appendix 3), and control materials (Appendix 4) for demonstration purposes.
6. Take time to thank publicly or personally those who help. I award a "Loyal Order of the Black Feather" citation (Appendix 5), list names in my monthly reports, or mention them to the media, but only if these people have given me their permission.

I have described and discussed the urban bird control program in Denton, Texas. The various aspects of the program as they relate to public relations are listed. I believe similar programs can be initiated elsewhere and succeed if proper emphasis is placed upon the establishment and maintenance of good public relations.

Appendix 1

Sample Field Note Format

Date: September 24, 1981

Location: Willow Springs Roads, Denton, Texas

Weather: 86⁰ F., humid, clear skies. Wind calm. S. Erdman and J. Miranda--observers.

Other features: The blackbird roost has been treated for 2 different sessions the past two weeks - each session using taped, amplified alarm calls, the first series the calls alone for 3 days, the second the calls reinforced with shot-like noises. Each session followed by a day of observations. Roost occupies about 2½ A. of densely wooded land on the E. side of Scott Industries, Willow Springs Rd. Est. numbers of birds and species: 75,000 birds; 50% Cowbird, 15% Starling, 20% Common Grackle and 15% Long-tailed Grackle.

Time:

- 1845 Tonight is observation. No action anticipated. Officer Miranda of the Denton Animal Control with me. As we arrive, blackbirds are flowing into the roost, not stopping to stage--at least from where we are stationed--street side of roost (W. edge). From this station, the birds approach and fly over the treetops on N. side of property, flying over and then beyond the test area where I have been using the alarm tapes, drop into the roost at least 200 yds. back from test area.
- 1904 A "cloud" of blackbirds in from the W. Est. 500 mixed species, mostly C. Grackles, with about 100 Starlings, and 20 Long-tailed G. in with them. The L.T.G. tails are longer after post-nuptial molt and now easier to spot. 100 Starlings noted staging on the guy wires of the Gen. Tel. Co. radio antenna to the S. (2 city blocks).
- 1907 I move N. to stream on N. side of roost. Large numbers of birds staging in trees on N. side of egret rookery, then flow by the 50's into the roost. Looking W, the approaching birds look like swarming insects as they near.
- 1912 Mixed flocks of 30-50 individuals moving W. from roost. Appear to be dropping into trees 2 blocks W. of roost. This westward movement not noted before. Generally, the birds come in from that direction, do not head back out again from the roost. UNUSUAL WESTWARD MOVEMENT.
- 1914 200 Cowbirds arrive, stage on the topmost powerline on S. side of Jackson Concrete Co.--this 400 yds. NW of roost. As a close-packed flock they all take off, fly E., turn and come back W., low over the stream, then perch on the wire once more.
- 1918 These birds now move into roost trees at near W. edge. All are C.B. I set off 1 firecracker about 100 ft. from W. edge of roost. All birds flush, circle, and then head E. None return to the treated trees.

1932 Street lights on. Sun down but still light in W. skies. No flights of B. Birds noted. Egrets still coming into their rookery N. of this roost. No birds noted using the roost trees at W. edge of roost.

1935 Stopped observation.

Appendix 2

Selected Bird Control References

Literature:

- ARBIB, R. 1972. On the art of estimating numbers. Am. Birds 26(4):706-712, 814.
- BOUDREAU, GORDON W. 1975. How to win the war with pest birds. Wildlife Technology, P.O. Box 1061, Hollister, CA 95023.
- DOLBEER, RICHARD A. and ROBERT A STEHN. 1979. Population trends of blackbirds and starlings in North America, 1966-76. United States Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Special Scientific Report-Wildlife No. 214, Washington, D.C.
- ERDMAN, SALLY S. Undated. Establishing an effective urban blackbird roost control program. Four-and-Twenty Enterprises, 302 Texas Street, Denton, Texas 76201.
- FITZWATER, WILLIAM D. Undated. Bird problems? What you can do about them! bioLOGIC Consultants, 3919 Alta Monte, NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110.
- GOOD, HEIDI B. and DAN M. JOHNSON. 1979. Experimental tree trimming to control an urban winter blackbird roost. Proc. Seventh Bird Control Seminar, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, 9-11 November.
- NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY. Undated. The blackbird problem. 950 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022.
- NATIONAL ACADEMY PRESS. 1980. Urban pest management. 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20418.
- U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE. Undated. Center for Disease Control, Bureau of State Services, Environmental Division. Histoplasmosis control - decontamination of bird roosts, chicken houses and other point sources - #003021, Atlanta, Georgia 30333.
- WEBER, WALTER J. 1979. Health hazards from pigeons, starlings and English sparrows. Thomson Publications, P.O. Box 9335, Fresno, CA 98791.

Individuals:

County Extension Agent or the extension specialist at the state university.
State Supervisor, Animal Damage Control, Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior for the state or region.
Sally S. Erdman, Four-and-Twenty Enterprises, 302 Texas Street, Denton, Texas 76201.

Agencies:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, State Supervisor,
Animal Damage control.
Kentucky Research Station, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 334 15th Street,
Bowling Green, Kentucky 42101.
Denver Wildlife Research Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Building 16,
Denver Federal Center, Denver, Colorado 80225.

Institutions:

Proceedings of Bird Control Seminar (convened every 3 years). Sponsored by
the Environmental Studies Center, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403, with the
assistance of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Pest
Control Association, Vienna, Virginia.
Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference (convened every other year),
California Department of Food and Agriculture, 1220 N Street, Room A-357,
Sacramento, CA 95814.

Appendix 3

A Method for Preserving Birds

Preserving birds by Formaldehyde-Plaster Injection for demonstration
specimens or decoys has many advantages over the traditional skinning method.
The finished specimen is durable with the feathers firmly fixed to the skin.
The chances of insect damage to the specimen are less than with a skinned
bird. The preserved bird can be handled repeatedly and is an excellent
"hands-on" teaching aid. The technique is very inexpensive and quick.

Materials needed:

Plaster of Paris	tooth brush
Formaldehyde solution	paper towels
12 cc syringe	weights, pins, if bird is to be
No. 18 needle - 1½" long	positioned
rubber gloves	artificial eyes
glass stirring rod	glue
	2 100 cc beakers

The dead bird must be fresh with no external wounds. If the bird has
been frozen, thaw it before beginning the preservation.

Mix about 60 cc Plaster of Paris with 30 cc formaldehyde solution in a
100 cc beaker. Wear rubber gloves and work under a hood to minimize irritation
from the fumes. The amounts of plaster and formaldehyde should be such that
the mixture will not clog the needle. Part the feathers and inject the soft
tissues (legs, wings, breast, neck and head at base of skull) and the body
cavities (crop, the thoracic and abdominal). Before refilling the syringe,
drop needle in a 100 cc beaker containing water and thoroughly mix plaster-
formaldehyde solution. Fill syringe, replace needle and inject. Stop when
the mixture appears at the bill or cloacal area. Wipe excess mixture from the
feathers. At the first injection the bird can be positioned in whatever final
pose is desired. Use wire, twine or pins. If the wings are to be extended

place the bird on its back or breast and weight or pin the wings in the desired position. Set aside. Repeat the same procedure in 1 to 2 days. Locate the soft areas which are those that need more plaster mixture and treat these. Three or four treatments are the average for most specimens.

Allow the specimen to dry thoroughly. Brush off plaster with a toothbrush. For more life-like birds, artificial eyes may be inserted. Taxidermists or craft stores stock different sizes. The eye usually stays in the head, but sometimes requires a drop of glue on the shaft before insertion.

Appendix 4

Bird Control Materials

Bird-X, Inc., 325 W. Huron St., Chicago, Illinois 60610. Ultrasonic devices, Av-Alarm, Roost-No-More products. Products aimed at structural protection or for enclosed areas rather than blackbird roosts in the outdoors.

Garden Monster. Camden, S. Carolina 29020. A black plastic streamer used to scare birds from small areas such as gardens and trees.

Marshall Hyde, Box 497, Port Huron, Michigan 48060. Supplier of pyrotechnical devices such as bird bombs, shells, guns.

Reed-Joseph International Co., Box 894, Greenville, Mississippi 38701. Supplier of gas-fired exploders.

Signal Broadcast Productions, Inc. 2314 Broadway, Denver, Colorado 80205. Bird repellent tapes and records (for sale).

Wildlife Technology, Dr. Gordon W. Boudreau, P.O. Box 1061, Hollister, CA 95023. Alarm tapes (for an annual rental fee).

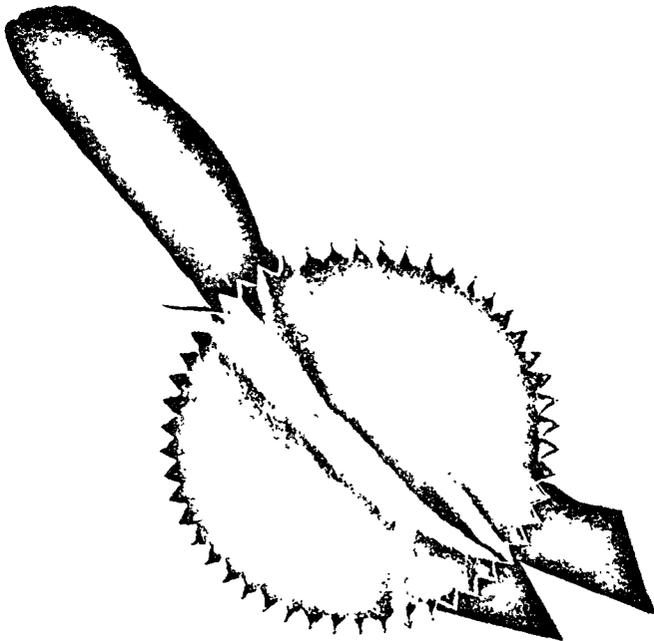
Appendix 5

Sample citation form

THE LOYAL ORDER OF THE BLACK FEATHER IS HEREBY CONFERRED UPON

J O H N N Y M I R A N D A

FURTHERMORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED FOR ALL TO WITNESS, THAT THE
RECIPIENT OF THIS HONOR HAS EXHIBITED OUTSTANDING DEVOTION
IN THE CAUSE OF PUBLIC WELL-BEING, HAS WITHSTOOD THE RIGORS OF
AN ACTIVE BIRD ROOST, FOUGHT OFF THE ATTACK OF
THE INSECTS THEREIN, AND SURVIVED THE PERVADING STENCH OF SAME,
FROM THIS DAY ON
THE RECIPIENT MAY CALL ALL BLACK BIRDS HIS BROTHERS



SIGNED AND SEALED THIS DAY,

Sally S. Erdman

October 7, 1981

SALLY S. ERDMAN
BIRD LADY OF DENTON
ORNITHOLOGICAL CONSULTANT TO
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY AND
THE CITY OF DENTON, TEXAS
FOUNDER AND SOLE MEMBER OF
FOUR-AND-TWENTY ENTERPRISES