December 1975

# Bird Control

George C. Halazon
*Extension Wildlife Specialist; Kansas State University*

We did a little work with pigeon sterilants six years ago. We didn't really have too much luck on bird control on pigeons because of the life of the pigeon. In other words we couldn't do it fast enough to satisfy the public because of the relatively large number of years required before the birds died.

## Bird Control

by

George C. Halazon
Extension Wildlife Specialist
Kansas State University

All of you in damage control know that you expect exaggeration. I have been working with Wichita-Sedgwick County Health Department ever since 1954. We started working on the cotton rat explosion with the Wichita-Sedgwick County Health Department and became well acquainted with the personnel. One day I got a call from Glen's boss and he said, "One of our county commissioners has a problem. He says he has thousands upon thousands of birds sitting in his trees. It is so bad that he can't even run his air conditioner." I took that with a grain of salt but agreed to go look. Believe it or not, we went out in the daytime and there was not a single bird there, but branches as big as one's arm were broken off of trees and the grass looked as if they had kept black chickens there. Manure was an inch thick. The house had storm doors on instead of screens in July and August, so you know that he really was suffering. We agreed to provide help. As Bill said earlier, the main thing is to know the habits of these birds and then to hit them--not with a soft stick, but hit them with the biggest stick you can and have three or four extra sticks in reserve. That is exactly what we did with those starlings. We weren't interested in killing all of the starlings, but we had to move them out because Don Cross' job if not his salary depended solely upon keeping the county commissioners happy.

The use of noise to disperse birds is not new, but we used a somewhat different pattern. We combined acetylene exploders for noise and well-trained shooters to convince the birds that the noise was detrimental. We were prepared to meet the first bird as he arrived at the roost in the evening. The exploders were adjusted to produce the maximum volume and the most rapid rate of firing. The exploders were hand held and aimed at the incoming flocks. The concussion effect was visible on the feathers of the birds. As the startled flocks wheeled to escape, the shooters emptied their guns. Light loads and No. 9-12 shot were used. The intent was not to kill large numbers of birds, just to frighten them. Some birds were killed. The birds persisted in attempting to roost in the area despite our efforts. We worked until dark. The flock finally was dispersed. The next evening the birds returned we were ready with the same procedure. The birds left early. The third night only a few stragglers appeared. No birds came on the fourth night and the flock was permanently moved from the area.

Bird management poses serious public relations problems. When the big problem of moving the millions of birds from Wichita was considered we made special plans to prevent adverse publicity. Business men in downtown Wichita were losing money because people refused to be exposed to the filth. Sanitation was a real problem. Disease was a strong probability. The situation was documented, governmental agencies were consulted, potential anti-control groups were invited for suggestions.

Our control plans called for moving the birds using the alarm call of the starling in combination with the exploders and team of shooters. The flocks of birds in such numbers as to darken the sky, arrived in the city about 5:00 p.m. The area was large. To provide the coverage we needed for the alarm calls, local radio stations agreed to broadcast the call. Stores and offices had their employees bring radios and play them at open windows.

Mobile control teams equipped with public address systems to amplify the calls, exploders and shooters were available to move to any trouble spot. The roofs of the most heavily infested buildings had teams similarly equipped. The units were all coordinated by a central command headquarters and interconnected by mobile radio.

The length of time it took us to move these multi-millions of birds in the city of Wichita which is a tremendous area was an unbelievable three days and the majority of birds were gone. There has not been another year since that when the starlings have been a serious problem. Some birds arrive in the fall, but Glen has his calendar set and is ready. As soon as flocks begin to congregate north of Wichita he institutes the program of dispersal. His activity and results are so well-known that he can walk downtown armed and the policemen won't cause him a bit of trouble. I believe he could carry a sack of dynamite on his back and no one would question him.

As Bill said earlier, the most important thing on any damage control is to know the animal that is causing trouble. There is absolutely no substitute for knowledge of the animal's behavior patterns. Every situtation is going to allow that animal to modify his behavior somewhat. You have to anticipate modifying your control to cover these changes. On bird control, "over-kill" is the answer and I don't mean death. I mean you must have power available so that you can overwhelm them. If for example, we would have allowed these birds to get on one of the buildings in that city that first night, it would have been a heck of a lot harder job the next day to completely chase them out of that area.

The reason the birds came to roost in town was quite simple--difference in the temperature. Setting where they were on these buildings near the lights and particularly right next to the windows which leak warm air from inside, $30^{\circ}$ to $50^{\circ}$ difference in the outside temperature prevailed, not to mention the wind factor. Some of these birds traveled 50 miles and more to one of the feedlots and back again for their warm night's roost. They weren't in a hurry to leave in the morning. They waited until things warmed up, and flew back to the feedlot where the operator was kind enough to serve them steamed hot breakfast. I don't know what more you could use to entice birds to an area.

Glen said he didn't have any complaints. That is not quite true. I saw a couple of letters which came from Oklahoma that called the Wichita-Sedgwick County Health Department some very unkind names for shoving the birds into Oklahoma.

This brings up a point I think we all need to face. Are we being ecologically sound and honest when we say the answer to these bird problems, particularly starlings, is to move Wichita's problem down to Oklahoma City? Do we as professionals have to realize that somewhere along the line we are going to have to take a stand and say so many starlings is enough and beyond that we are going to be forced to manage the population? We do know that starlings exert ecological pressure on some of our more desirable native birds. We also know that in many areas the starling provides a service to agriculture by feeding on insect pests. Somewhere along the line, we do need a philosophical judgment made as to just how many of the birds need to be tolerated in an area, whether or not they are going to be pushing these birds from one place to the next, or will we decide to eliminate some of the birds. It isn't a decision that any individual can make. It is something I would like the whole group of professionals involved in control make. The decision must be made in agreement with our total society.