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BLACKBIRD DEPREDATIONS IN ANIMAL INDUSTRY: FEEDLOTS

Donald Balser
Wildlife Research Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, Colorado

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Dr. Donald Balser, Assistant Chief
Section of Control Methods
Wildlife Research Center
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Denver, Colorado

Reviewing the cattle feedlot problems in the west, we have cattle feedlots near most of our large population centers and in some cases they are located near supplies of rations, such as potatoes in Idaho or beet pulp, milo, etc. Perhaps the greatest number of feedlots are in California which has our largest human population but there are also large operations in Utah, Idaho, Oregon, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona which have reported bird damage problems.

Later on in the program we'll have a film taken by our bird project personnel of work in feedlots in Colorado so I'll try to describe the situation in more general terms.

Weather and latitude have a lot to do with the severity of bird problems in feedlots. Feedlots located in the northern fringes of the wintering range, particularly, Idaho, eastern Oregon, Colorado, etc., are apt to be the ones most heavily damaged. In fact, it is in these areas when snow covers the ground and cold weather freezes the ground that birds flock in the heaviest to feedlots.

Some believe that the presence of feedlots with an open daily supply of food may cause starlings to winter further north than they ordinarily would.

I'll confine the discussion to starlings, while blackbirds are involved, the amount of food consumed, their feeding behavior and contamination caused by blackbirds is much less. Blackbirds feed primarily in pens and alleys, eat far less and excrete less than starlings. When looking at a feedlot problem it is important to distinguish between species and observe closely which birds are feeding mainly out of the feed bunkers.

As we go further south into New Mexico, Arizona and California, we find that with the open winters, while birds frequent the feedlots much of their feeding may actually be done in open fields and pastures. For example, in the Imperial Valley of California the birds spend the day loafing in the feedlot, usually seeking shade and damage may be

slight. Attempts to bait these birds in the feedlot usually end in failure. The birds are feeding in the milo and alfalfa fields morning and evening when going to or from the roosts. Also baiting in northern feedlots is often unpredictable and unsuccessful during periods when birds find ample feed in the fields.

Successful baiting at feedlots requires a thorough knowledge of the birds and a lot of patience and careful observation if any degree of success is to be achieved. It also requires chemicals that are safe, selective and the judgment not to bait when protected species or game birds may be coming into the bait site.

Our research at Denver is concerned not only with finding improved chemicals but safer, better, more effective ways of applying them. And the effort is not limited to chemicals, (lethal, repellent, or sleep-inducing) but explores every area of research into damage control including environmental, physical and electronic means. Our bird project personnel have also been successful in keeping birds from feedlots through use of frightening chemicals and sound.

However, in transferring this to information that can be used operationally we have to build in certain reliability which we aren't able to do yet. Also there is the problem of registration of chemicals and this is a step beyond research and before practical application. A lot of work also goes into this phase, to supply all the necessary data for registration.

There are a lot of aspects of bird behavior involved in the feedlot problem. Our biologists have learned, for example, a given population may interchange between feedlots and the maximum number of birds seen in a feedlot at any one time may be considerably less than the total number of birds actually using the lot.

Fall buildup and spring migration particularly cloud the issue so it is difficult to measure baiting success. It is only during the periods of stable winter populations one can get an idea what is happening and even then changes in the weather upset bird behavior.

In order to properly evaluate results of baiting, the subsequent film will show the sampling methods used on marsh transects to count dead birds. This can't always be done in wet marshes and consequently accurate evaluation of some of the larger field trials has been extremely elusive.

In general, starlings can be baited successfully in the northern portions of their wintering areas using the new compound DRC-1339 a starling toxicant. Information on this compound is the subject of two articles in the Journal of Wildlife Management which I won't repeat here. I do have a few extra reprints with me if any of you wish to see them. We have pretty well completed our research in cattle feedlots with this compound except for tests on starling population dynamics and new baiting techniques where this compound is used only as a tool.

I should point out that DRC-1339 is a general bird toxicant, so

should not be used where other protected birds may be found. It is also slow-acting, and because it is slow-acting, birds are usually killed in the roost and may drop out along flight lines. This makes it extremely difficult to evaluate, so whoever uses it in the future may run into this problem.

One other word of caution, misuse or accidents with a good compound may cause criticism or unfavorable publicity when actually it isn't the fault of the compound, but the manner in which it was applied.

It is important to distinguish between a tool and good or poor use of it. A circular saw can cut off your hand if it's misused. We are extremely anxious not to have new chemicals receive a bad name before their utility is proven.

Our biologists are now experimenting with other new compounds, in the area of sleep-inducing chemicals, called soporifics and behavior-altering drugs. Information is slated for publication on several of these shortly.

There is much more to be said about bird problems in feedlots but I'll stop and turn it back to Dick.

R. SMITH: I'd like to add that in these starling-feedlot situations, we have been able to get material into a bird. In Ohio one of the great stumbling blocks in relation to redwings damaging corn is how to get the toxic or repellent material into an acceptable bait form which the birds will eat.

DR. BELSER: I should make a differentiation in our feedlots. The baiting works best on northern feedlots, in the northern range of the starling. As we progress southward into Arizona and California, it's much tougher to get bait acceptance.

H. COLEMAN: What type of bait did you use?

DR. BALSER: A variety. Poultry pellets worked well in Colorado. French fries at potato processing plants in Idaho where they were associated with feedlots. In California, it's a different problem, we can get by on a mixture of raisins, and various local foods. They are taking whatever they find, which seems suitable feed in whatever mixture the feedlot operator uses. Some use beet pulp pellets, and other pellets, various supplements, whole grain, cracked grain, it varies greatly.

R. SMITH: That's going to be one of your problems marketing this material.

DR. BALSER: We realize that. We have pointed it out to the research officials that the bait may have to vary.

[Discussion on page 113.]