2-12-1989

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Field Trials of Alpha-Chloralose and DRC-1339 for Reducing Numbers of Herring Gulls
Paul P. Woronecki, Richard A. Dolbeer, and Thomas W. Seamans

Abstract. — We compared the potential of Alpha-chloralose (A-C) and DRC-1339 to reduce a nesting population of herring gulls at an industrial site in Ohio in 1988. Almost all treated baits were consumed by gulls but only about one affected gull was noted for every 10 baits consumed of either chemical. A test indicated our DRC-1339 baits, containing 3.7–7.4 times the published LD value, were not lethal to most captive herring gulls living in fresh water. LD values of A-C and DRC-1339 need to be more precisely estimated for gull species in fresh and salt water environments.

INTRODUCTION

Gull populations have increased in recent years in North America resulting in urban nuisance problems, agricultural crop damage and reductions in populations of other bird species that compete for nest sites (Ludwig 1966, Drury 1973, Conover 1983, Blokpoel and Tessier 1986). In the western Lake Erie region, ring-billed (Larus delawarensis) and herring (Larus argentatus) gull populations during autumn migration have increased 20- and 6-fold, respectively, in the past 30 years (Dolbeer and Bernhardt 1986).

There are 95 chemical products currently registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to control bird damage and nuisance problems in the United States (Eschen and Schafer 1986). Only four include gulls as target species: Polybutene and Polyisobutylene — both nontoxic tactile repellents; 4-Aminopyridine (Avitrol) — a lethal frightening agent; and 3-chloro-4-methyl-benzylamine HCl (DRC-1339), a toxicant. Currently, DRC-1339 can only be used by U.S. government personnel to control herring, and great black-backed gulls (Larus marinus) in the coastal nesting areas of Delaware, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. There are no gull toxicants registered for field use outside the coastal nesting areas of the Northeastern U.S. EPA is currently considering the expansion of the present registration to include ring-billed gulls and other geographical locations.

USDA/APHIS/ADC operational personnel have indicated a need for expansion of present registrations or development of new chemical registrations for gull control (Fagerstone and Schafer 1988). The objective of this pilot field study was to compare the potential of a presently unregistered chemical, alpha chloralose (CBH, Cl0) and the registered gull toxicant DRC-1339, to reduce a nesting population of herring gulls in Ohio.

DESCRIPTION OF CHEMICALS

A-C has also been used to reduce populations of several species of birds (without endangering nontarget species) that either were a nuisance, potential hazard to aircraft or harmful to agriculture (Anon. 1960, 1962, Thearle 1960, 1969a, 1969b, Ridpath et al. 1961, Murton 1962, 1963, Murton et al. 1965, Caithness 1968, Thearle et al. 1971, Cyr 1977, Peare et al. 1981, Dolbeer 1987). Several bird and mammal species have had a LD and a ED, (sometimes referred to as Temporary Immobilization dose (TISD) not to be confused with the therapeutic index (TI) established). The ED, of A-C for wild birds ranges from 5.6 - 85 mg/kg and the LD30 from 32 - 400 mg/kg with a safety factor from 3.2 - 23. The LD range for rats, cats and dogs is 200-600 mg/kg (Goldenberg 1939, Gilban 1950 and 1951, Borg 1955, Ridpath et al. 1961, Schafer and Cunningham 1972, Pesticides Board 1977, Cunningham et al. 1987).

A-C has been registered as an avian control agent in Great Britain, France, New Zealand and Australia. However, limited attention has been given to the use of A-C as an agent for the capture or poisoning of gulls. Borg (1955) had a kill rate of 93% for herring gulls in Sweden with an A-C bait concentration of 100 mg in 80 g fish (0.125% A-C by weight). Caithness (1968) killed at least 85% of a breeding colony of 2,500 southern black-backed gulls (Larus dominicanus) in New Zealand with 5-g bread baits each containing 400 mg of A-C (3.77% A-C by weight). Control activities on lesser blackbacked gulls (Larus fuscus) and herring gulls have been conducted at their breeding sites during egg incubation in Great Britain. A-C treated bread squares placed in nests were eaten by the adults (Mitchell 1976). However, neither the ED50 nor LD50 for A-C have been established for any gull species.

Physical, chemical and toxicological properties of DRC-1339 have been summarized by DeCino et al. (1966). DRC1339 is a slow-acting toxicant that impairs the circulatory system, causing uremic poisoning and congestion of major organs. Death can occur up to four days after ingestion. DRC1339 is registered in the U.S. to reduce populations of several species of birds that are a nuisance or harmful to agriculture (Eschen and Schafer 1986) and since 1969 it has been used to reduce gull populations in Maine and Massachusetts (Gramlich 1969, Ladd 1970, Snow and Gramlich 1971a, and Yerogan et al. 1986, 1987). The only LD50 information presently available for gulls was obtained by Wetherbee (1968) for herring gulls on the east coast and estimated to be 2.9 mg/kg (Schafer 1979). However, the actual weights of the gulls tested were not considered when dosing or determining the LD50.

### STUDY AREA AND METHODS

The study was conducted in 1988 at the Lower Lake Dock Company (LLDC), a 30-ha nesting and loafing site for herring gulls in Sandusky, Ohio adjacent to Sandusky Bay of Lake Erie (fig. 1). Gulls have created various problems at the LLDC, a coal shipping facility, primarily by causing power outages at the transformer station and disrupting workers through aggressive defense of nests and young. The LLDC is 0.4 km west of Turning Point Island, a 2.0-ha man-made island with two adjacent 4 x 450-m breakwalls, that has supported a nesting colony of herring gulls since at least 1977 (Scharf 1978, Dolbeer et al. 1988).

Prebait was spread by pouring 12 g of soft margarine on a slice of soft white bread and covering with another slice. The sandwich was then pressed firmly with a flat board and sliced into 18 pieces. Each piece weighed about 3.3 g. Prebaiting was conducted on 12 and 13 April by spreading about 1,000 baits on the ground each day at various sites at the LLDC.

Baiting with A-C was conducted between 0800 and 1000 on 14, 15, 18, 20 and 22 April (table 1). A-C was mixed with the margarine to a level of 4, 8 or 16% by weight, resulting in bread baits containing 26, 53, or 106 mg of AC. Baits were placed in nests or spread out in lines at 2- to 3-m intervals where concentrations of gulls were located. Bait sites were observed to determine the time of initial bait consumption and initial reaction and immobilization.

DRC-1339 (obtained from Denver Wildlife Research Center) was mixed with margarine to a level of 1.6 or 3.2% by weight. This resulted in each bread bait containing 10.8 or 21.6 mg of DRC-1339, 3.7 to 7.4 times the LD value of 2.9 mg/kg reported for herring gulls (Schafer 1979). (Note: herring gulls in our study averaged about 1 kg in weight – see table 3).

Baiting was conducted on 27 April, 3 May and 13 May in the same manner as with A-C.

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3LD50 is the median lethal dose that produces death and the ED50 is the median effective dose that produces a defined effect (e.g., capture) in half of the population to which the drug is administered and the safety factor (Therapeutic Index) is the ratio of LD50 to the ED50 (TI=LD50/ED 50).
A rough estimate of the gull population at the LLDC was made at the time of each baiting by visually scanning the area with binoculars from several observation points. All baits not consumed within two hrs of placement were retrieved. After A - C baatings, the coal docks and surrounding loafing areas up to 2 km away were searched for dead or affected gulls during a 3-4 hr period. After DRC-1339 baiting, similar searches usually were made 24 hrs later and then at 1-2 day intervals for 4 days. Dead birds were retrieved and buried; incapacitated gulls were placed in a 2.5 x 2.5 x 2.0-m holding cage with food (fish offal) and water until they either recovered or died. 

RESULTS

A-C Baitings.---A total of 1,597 A-C baits were placed at the LLDC during the four batings of which 1,308 were consumed primarily by gulls and a few starlings (Sturnus vulgaris) (table 1). Immobilization occurred as quickly as nine minutes after bait was consumed although most gulls did not show affects for 15 to 20 minutes. Of the 99 affected gulls retrieved, 34 survived. An additional 37 affected gulls were noted floating in the bay, but we were unable to retrieve them because of rough water. Thus, we recorded a total of 136 affected gulls or about 1,000 baits consumed. About 1,000 gulls were at the LLDC during these batings and the subsequent DRC-1339 batings.

Gulls reacted to affected gulls in various ways. Often gulls would fly, spiraling high above the LLDC. On occasion, a gull would use its bill to tug at an affected mate. Most affected birds were retrieved within 1 km of the LLDC, many becoming incapacitated while in the water of the bay. Two immobilized gulls were found 6 to 7 km from the LLDC by individuals who brought them to us via Ohio Division of Wildlife personnel. Bait shyness from one day to the next did not appear to be a problem. However, on a given day, once gulls started reacting, feeding ceased although gulls did not abandon the LLDC.

DRC-1339 Baitings of 1,570 baits placed out during three batings, 100% were eaten. Almost all by gulls but also by a few starlings (table 1). Initial deaths occurred within 24 hrs but most occurred 48 to 72 hrs after consumption (table 2). A total of 145 birds were retrieved or about one gull for every 11 baits consumed. Bait shyness was not a problem. Almost all recoveries were within 1 km of the LLDC. Twelve decomposed gulls found dead in a field 4 km southwest of LLDC on 12 May were probably DRC-1339 poisoned gulls but they may have been A-C poisoned birds.

DRC-1339 Bioassay.---Although the lowest dose we evaluated (10.8 mg DRC-1339) was about 3.7 times the published LD 50 value for herring gulls (Schafer 1979), three of the four gulls survived (table 3). One out of 4 gulls dosed at 21.6 and 43.2 mg DRC-1339 survived (table 3).

DISCUSSION

Bait acceptance with both chemicals was excellent, with over 2,800 baits being consumed by gulls. Curiously, however, only about one dead or affected gull was found for every 10 baits consumed of either chemical, and the population of about 1,000 gulls at the LLDC showed little or no decline during the study. For A-C, ED50 and LD50 values have not been determined for gull species, but data for other avian species suggest that the doses we provided per bait (26 to 106 mg) should have been sufficient to immobilize a gull consuming a single bait. We know that multiple baits commonly were consumed by individual gulls, especially during the initial two batings with A-C when we did not spread out the bait as widely as in later batings. This may explain some of the discrepancy between baits consumed.
and gulls affected. However, we suspect that some unknown but substantial number of gulls dispersed from the LLDC before becoming immobilized and were never located.

For DRC-1339, the doses provided per bait were 3.7 to 7.4 times the published LD value for herring gulls and each gull consuming a bait should have died. However, the bioassay we conducted with 12 gulls indicated that either the chemical used was not pure or the herring gulls on Lake Erie have higher LD 50 values for DRC-1339 than those published. Drennan et al. (1987) noted similar concerns about reduced toxicity of DRC-1339 in a program in Maine for controlling nesting populations of herring gulls and great black-backed gulls.

The fact that the population of gulls at the LLDC did not show a noticeable decline, even considering that substantially more gulls may have died than we recovered, can be explained by the large population of gulls in adjacent areas (fig. 1) such as Turning Point Island (Dolbeer et al. 1988). Gulls at the LLDC probably represented less than 10% of the gulls within a 4 km² area and dead gulls could have quickly been replaced. Our findings suggest that problems caused by gulls at the LLDC, such as power outages, can best be solved by erecting wire grid exclusion devices (Blokpoel and Tessier 1984). Poisoning programs at LLDC to reduce populations of gulls will provide only temporary relief at best as long as the gull populations are thriving in adjacent areas.

Although we do not recommend poisoning programs as a means of solving gull problems at LLDC, we recommend further testing of both A-C and DRC-1339 on gulls to develop these toxicants for other situations. A-C is fast acting and, depending on dosage, gulls can either be killed or captured alive. Although bait shyness occurs once gulls start reacting to A-C (usually about 15 min after initial bait consumption), this shyness does not seem to carry over to subsequent days. DRC-1339 is slow acting and thus bait placement and feeding by gulls can occur over an extended period on a given day without bait shyness developing.

For A-C, ED₅₀ and LD₅₀ values need to be more precisely estimated for gull species. For future DRC-1339 work, chemical assays should be conducted to ensure chemical purity. Also LD 50 estimates for gulls from the Great Lakes and other regions are needed. DRC-1339 primarily affects the renal system; therefore, there may be a difference in the toxicity of this chemical for gulls living in fresh and salt water environments.
Table 2. -- Number of dead herring gulls recovered 1, 2 and 3 or wore days after baiting with DRC1339, Lower Lake Dock Co., Sandusky, Ohio, 1988.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of baiting</th>
<th>DRC-1339/24 hrs</th>
<th>DRC-1339/48 hrs</th>
<th>DRC-1339/72 hrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 April</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 May</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 May</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Searchers were not made.

Table 3. -- Mortality of captive herring gulls force-fed bread baits with 1 of 3 levels of DRC-1339 on 9 May 1988, Sandusky, Ohio.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dose (mg DRC-1339 per bait)</th>
<th>Weight (g) xSD 24 hr</th>
<th>No. of gulls alive of 48 hr</th>
<th>&gt;72 hrs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>41,053</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>4990</td>
<td></td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>4940</td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>994</td>
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<td>90</td>
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</table>

LITERATURE CITED


