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THE USE OF BORDER COLLIES TO DISPERSE BIRDS AT SOUTHWEST FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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Similar to many airports throughout the United States and Canada, Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) has a number of development features attractive to wildlife. Such features include stormwater detention ponds, large expanses of open fields, natural wetland marshes, and mature trees. In order to maintain safe operations and minimize the potential for wildlife-aircraft collisions, RSW has expanded the existing wildlife harassment program to include the use of a border collie. An Ecological Study completed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1997 indicated regular use of the airfield throughout the year by wading birds, waterfowl, and blackbirds. Although the RSW Operations Department regularly harassed wildlife with pyrotechnics, USDA noted that many of these birds, especially large bodied sandhill cranes, had become habituated to the noise makers. In addition, many of the most common birds noted by the USDA study were listed as Endangered, Threatened or Species of Special Concern, and are protected from harm by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Therefore, it was necessary to implement a new form of harassment that would be effective at reducing wildlife use of the airfield but would not injure the protected wildlife. A border collie was added to the established harassment program in February 1999. Since the border collie joined the bird harassment program, no sandhill cranes nested during the 1999 & 2000 seasons in the AOA, wading bird use was reduced by 50%, wading bird species richness was reduced, crows and blackbird numbers were reduced, and total bird strikes were reduced. Initial results suggest that the program can be improved with changes in the timing and frequency of border collie use. We also recommend sufficient staffing levels and basic training requirements and qualifications for dog handlers.