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TRAPPING FERAL PIGEONS

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When I look at the multitude of pests and diseases you have here in the United States, it is a miracle to me that you are still alive today. The United Kingdom is fortunate in having very few bird pests in urban areas. We have the English Sparrow, the starling, and the feral pigeon. We are also a nation of bird lovers, with a large number of organizations that look after the welfare of wild birds. So, we in pest control have to be very careful in our control procedures.

In 1954, a Protection of Birds Act was passed by Parliament, and a further one in 1967. These two acts divide birds up into a number of schedules. The first schedule lists birds that are totally protected; the second schedule lists birds that can be killed or taken at any time by authorized persons. The third schedule lists birds that can be killed, or taken, outside the closed season, and the fourth, birds that are not to be sold alive unless they are raised and bred in captivity. In addition these acts prohibit the use of springs, traps, snares, hooks, poison or stupefying baits, explosives and gas, and place severe limitations on the use of firearms. You cannot use a gun with a muzzle diameter greater than 1% inches! Also, there are restrictions on the use of lights, nets, and vehicles for catching birds. You may ask, and quite rightly at this point, how on earth are we able to control birds.

There are a few methods we can use, however, and with proper care, quite successfully. We can use repellents. We use a plastic gel which we put on buildings in strips. The material does not entangle birds if used properly. We can "proof against birds. These are mechanical devices that just keep birds off buildings. We use nylon netting a great deal to keep birds from roosting and nesting on buildings, especially our older buildings. None of these methods reduce the number of birds, however. We can shoot birds, but we cannot discharge a firearm within 50 feet of a public highway, which is difficult in most areas. We can narcotize birds, under limited circumstances, using alpha-chloralose on baits; the protected species are released, and the pest birds placed in a bin with some carbon tetrachloride and taken away. These treatments must be notified to the Ministry of Agriculture, which has the right to attend every treatment to ensure proper procedures are being followed. However, most of our treatments are accomplished at 3 or 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning in the summer, so officials do not attend every routine treatment.

Now let me move along to our feral pigeon trapping program. Our aims are threefold. We have to reduce bird numbers faster than they can reproduce. Secondly we want to catch the birds without any public notice, and thirdly we want to get at least a 70% reduction in the population within a short period of time, about 6-8 weeks. Theoretically, a pair of pigeons can give rise to a population of 100 in 16

months: this assumes two eggs per clutch, a period of 8 weeks from egg laying to fledgling and sexual maturity at 4-5 months. In practise, squab mortality reduces this figure; moreover, less than 40% of female pigeons may be in breeding condition at any one time. Despite these factors, a pair of pigeons can give rise to a population of 100 in about 30 months. Rapid removal of birds is therefore essential to combat the breeding potential of a flock of pigeons.

Our observations of feral pigeons indicated that the populations of most towns are relatively static and that the birds also seemed to be somewhat under-nourished, suggesting that the populations were at a maximum level. Roosting sites may be the limiting factor or it may simply be insufficient food.

The initial survey determines how many flocks are present, where the day roosts are located, and how many birds are involved. We then select our trapping sites within this area in relation to the various flocks. Finally, we get the cooperation of the building owners where we want to put our traps and if possible the local authorities involved. We have experimented with trap design and the food preference of feral pigeons to optimize the bait used. We developed waterproofing methods for the baits because we had found that pigeons will not eat wet bait if dry is available.

We found that continuous trapping with large traps was ineffective in reducing bird numbers, so we devised a trapping sequence as follows. We pre-bait for two weeks, making four visits to each site during this period. The next three weeks are devoted to trapping, and then a return to a pre-baiting sequence. The seventh and eighth weeks are trapping periods once again. We make about 30 visits to each site during this sequence. All trapping is accomplished on the tops of buildings, in areas easily seen by the birds but out of public view. During the pre-baiting periods, doors on the tops of the traps are opened so that the birds can enter and leave the traps at their leisure. Then the doors are closed and trapping commences. Trapped birds are removed from the traps, placed in a sack which is then placed in a zip bag, and the birds taken from the site for gassing.

Our first 33 treatments have averaged out 76% effective. If we leave out two rather dismal failures, the percentage goes up to 85%, which we are rather pleased with. We have attempted some trapping on individual buildings; some of these programs have been successful, others not so successful.

This has been a rather brief discussion of our feral pigeon trapping program. I feel this type of program could have a place here in America, even though you have a greater variety of bird control techniques available to you.

DISCUSSION:

W. SENSKE: How do you waterproof your baits?

J.O. BULL: We use a small portion of repellent silica for waterproofing. You notice I'm not telling you what proportions to use; it cost us real money to find that out.

B. PETERSON: What were your approximate cost per pigeon removed?

J.O. BULL: On average, I think 50 to 70 cents per bird.

M.R.WOULFE: What time of the year were the percentages of birds in breeding condition determined?

J.O. BULL: From November to May, I think.

W. FITZWATER: What months of the year do you do your trapping?

J.O. BULL: We trap whenever we can make the arrangements with the people involved.

DELEGATE: What do you do with the birds after they are put in the zip bag?

J.O. BULL: They are taken to the operator's van, gassed with carbon tetrachloride, and then burned.

W. FITZWATER: Have you tried using decoys in your traps?

J.O. BULL: We have, yes, but this has not increased the trap's effectiveness, so we do not do it routinely.