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Reducing Blackbird Damage

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REDUCING BLACKBIRD



DAMAGE

**Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
U.S. Department of Agriculture
in cooperation with
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

REDUCING BLACKBIRD

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Blackbirds (which include redwing, yellow headed, and Brewers blackbirds, grackles, and cowbirds) gather in black clouds each summer, preparing for migration long before fall actually arrives. These congregating birds seem hungrier than usual; they need to satisfy their daily energy needs and also stock up for their journey southward.

Most of us wish them well in their southern journey and have no regret about their gleaning our stubble fields for scattered seeds.

However, we have strong emotions about the birds sharing the profits from our unharvested corn, milo, and sunflowers. The purpose of this leaflet is to provide information leading to coexistence with the birds while maintaining our profit margins.

Blackbirds are opportunists—they take what's available

By the end of July, blackbirds begin to congregate. Bona fide "blackbirds" usually roost in marshes, but grackles roost in either trees or marshes. In August, the local birds are joined by migrants from more northern breeding grounds, and numbers swell. Cowbirds and starlings also join the flocks.

These aggregations of birds make daily trips from their roosts to corn, milo, and sunflower fields as well as to stubble fields, woods and meadows. The trips start about dawn when the birds depart in "groups" or "flightlines" to find food.

Some select the nearest field, others continue for one reason or another to other fields, and some may travel as much as 20 miles from the roost before finding a suitable place to feed.

Feeding is heaviest just after leaving the roost in the morning

and just prior to returning to the roost in the evening, but blackbirds feed intermittently between periods of rest and travel throughout the day.

Blackbirds are a part of the "natural" wildlife of South Dakota. Overall populations have remained relatively stable, according to records of the past 50 years. Insects and wild seeds, including various grass and weed seeds, are the basic ingredients in the blackbirds' annual diet.

But these birds are also opportunists. They are seasonally attracted to certain grains and sunflowers prior to harvest and also to waste grain in harvested fields.

Standing corn is vulnerable to attack by birds from the milk stage to harvest. Ears containing kernels in the milk and early dough stages are especially attractive.

Redwings and grackles pierce the husk and puncture the soft kernels. Grackles will remove entire kernels when the grain is hard. Cowbirds are unable to remove the husks but feed on ears where husks have been removed by the other two species.

Milo, like corn is susceptible to bird damage from milk stage to harvest. Sunflowers are especially attractive, and thousands of pounds of seeds may be removed by the hungry birds.

You can protect your crops

Damage to crops can be prevented or minimized through the appropriate use of cultural practices, scaring devices and harassment, and a chemical frightening agent individually or collectively as applicable.

Cultural practices that will help to prevent or minimize bird damage include:

1. Avoid or cut down on planting corn, milo, or sunflowers near sloughs, marshes, trees, or established flightpaths of blackbirds.
2. Plant crop varieties that can be harvested before the blackbirds congregate in large migrating flocks if possible.

3. Consider using bird resistant varieties if corn or milo is to be planted in areas which have a history of blackbird damage.

4. Leave stubble fields that have been recently harvested unplowed to serve as alternate sources of food. Protect these stubble fields from disturbance and help birds feel "secure" here.

Scaring devices include .22 rifles, shotguns, shellcrackers, gas exploders, rope firecrackers, broadcasted distress calls, scarecrows and flagging, and simulated models of hawks and owls.

Two pointers for using scaring devices and harassment to prevent or minimize crop damage are:

1. Do not allow any blackbirds to stay in the field once the crop is vulnerable to damage. Small groups will attract large numbers into the field. Once feeding habits have been established in a field the birds are much more difficult to repel.
2. One or more persons shooting and harassing the birds with firearms is the most effective method of moving blackbirds. This technique also contributes to the effectiveness of other scaring devices which are effective only as long as the birds associate danger with the particular sight or sound.

The .22 caliber rifle is effective as a scaring device where it can be used legally and safely to harass blackbirds. A rifleman stationed high in a tree, on a silo or building, or on a tall platform can frighten birds for a long distance. The noise of the projectile passing close by is sufficient to cause the birds to fly.

Shotguns firing conventional rounds are effective but have limited range.

Shellcrackers extend the range of a shotgun as a frightening device. Shellcrackers are special shotgun shells that discharge a projectile which explodes after

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traveling about 200 yards. Shellcrackers should not be fired over or into dry grass or brush, as a fire may result.

Gas exploders produce loud explosions at automatically timed intervals. They use acetylene gas, butane, or propane. Exploders should be mounted on platforms above the unharvested crop and moved frequently. One exploder every 10 acres is considered optimal.

Rope firecrackers are flash-type salutes with their fuses inserted between strands of loosely twisted cotton rope. One end of the rope is tied to the apex of a tripod frame and the other end is ignited. As the rope burns, the ignited firecrackers drop and explode. Variation in timing is provided by placing the firecrackers at varying distances along the rope. Eliminate the danger of fire by clearing flammable material from the area around the tripod frame.

Electronic devices that broadcast recorded distress calls of blackbirds have been used effectively to protect a small area. However, the equipment is quite expensive.

Scarecrows and flagging will help if moved frequently and not left in the same locations for extended periods. They are effective longer when coupled with noise.

Models of hawks and owls are effective if moved frequently but can only protect small areas around each model. Small growers near urban areas where noise makers would be offensive might find these devices most useful.

Chemical frightening agent. *Avitrol FC-99 Corn Chops* has been approved by the Environmental Protection Agency for use in protecting standing corn against damage by redwinged blackbirds and associated species.

Blackbirds ingesting a treated particle of *Avitrol FC-99* react with distress symptoms and calls. These frighten the remainder of the flock from the area. *Avitrol* may not be used on sweetcorn intended for use as human food.

The active ingredient is 4-aminopyridine which is impregnated into corn chops. The treated corn particles are blended 1 to 99 with untreated corn particles to prepare the bait for field application. The 1:99 blended bait is applied aerially at the rate of 3 pounds per treated acre by a certified applicator.

Swaths 50 feet wide are treated and untreated swaths of 100 feet remain between the treated swaths. The rate of application is equivalent to 1 pound per acre for the entire field.

Three or four treatments may be necessary when bird damage is

severe. Fifty foot swaths around the perimeter of the field, along field trails, and around water areas are left untreated.

A listing of certified applicators in South Dakota may be obtained by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P. O. Box 250, Pierre; Extension Wildlife Specialist, Wildlife and Fisheries Department, SDSU, Brookings; or your local county Extension agent.

But blackbirds are protected from indiscriminate killing

Blackbirds are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, but they may be killed when committing or about to commit serious damage to agricultural crops.

It is illegal to sell feathers or other parts of the birds. You must furnish federal and state officials with any information they request concerning the methods used to prevent damage if the methods result in killing the birds, and you must conform to state and federal regulations regarding the use of poisons or other methods.

Sources of materials and additional information are available from the Extension Wildlife Specialist, SDSU, Brookings; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Box 250, Pierre; or your county Extension agent.

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