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BLACKBIRDS

in Field Crops

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Blackbirds generally do more good than harm, but they can be a real nuisance to some farmers. When cereal crops, sunflowers or vegetables are grown close to marshes, or in other spots that attract blackbirds, large numbers of them may feed in the fields. They can do considerable damage to barley, oats, sunflowers and corn in the milk and dough stages.

The redwinged blackbird¹ is the most numerous kind. Others associated with it are the yellow-headed blackbird² and Brewer's blackbird³ (in the West), the common grackle⁴ and the starling.⁵ The starling is distinguished by its long yellowish beak, short tail and speckled breast.

THEIR BEHAVIOR

Blackbirds have definite needs that must be met before they become plentiful.

NESTING. They prefer to nest among cattails, rushes and other vegetation above or near water. Roadside ditches, farm dugouts, sloughs and marshes are the most likely places. If their natural cover is removed from these locations, they nest in grain fields, alfalfa and weedy fence rows. The birds do not congregate in large flocks during the nesting period.

AUTUMN FLOCKING. After nesting, family groups band together in large flocks, which are swelled by migrants arriving in August and September. The birds gather where water and food are close together.

They must have a night roost, preferably a body of water covering several acres or large marshes with ample vegetation consisting of cattails, rushes, sedges, tall grass or willows growing in the water. All the blackbirds in the district gather there at night. Some flocks may rest in trees or fields at sunset before moving to the main roost.

¹*Agelaius phoeniceus* (Linnaeus).
²*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* (Bonaparte).
³*Euphagus cyanocephalus* (Wagler).
⁴*Quiscalus quiscula versicolor* Vieillot.
⁵*Sturnus vulgaris* Linnaeus.

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At sunrise the birds leave the roost in flocks to feed within a radius of about three miles. They select a field close to trees and a water hole, and spend the day feeding, drinking, and resting in the trees.

THEIR FOOD

To discover what types of food they eat, we examined the gizzards of hundreds of blackbirds collected throughout the season. This is what we found:

WASTE GRAIN. On their return in the spring and after harvest, blackbirds consume large quantities of the gleanings of oats, wheat and sunflowers.

WEED SEEDS. They eat plenty of weed seeds whenever these are available, particularly green foxtail, wild oats and wild buckwheat.

INSECTS. Insects are the main diet in the summer; the young are fed entirely on them. Blackbirds eat whatever insects are abundant, destroying many noxious kinds in the fields, including grasshoppers, the beet webworm, the sweetclover weevil, grain aphids and others of lesser importance.

CROPS. When a crop is grown close to the roosts, blackbirds may damage the seed from the milk stage until it is ripe. They attack oats, barley, wheat, sunflowers and corn. Garden peas are injured but not soup peas, which they visit only to feed on insects. The birds continue to settle in fields of sunflowers that have ripened but feed mainly on weed seeds and insects. They cause damage by settling on the standing crop, breaking over the heads and picking out the kernels.

Blackbirds also feed on freshly swathed grain until the seed becomes hard, but then they prefer to pick up moist, shattered grain on the ground, or weed seeds and insects. They don't touch flax, sweet clover or forage crops.

To sum up, their feeding habits are generally beneficial but blackbirds can be a serious problem to individual farmers. Some ripening crops, particularly sunflowers and sweet corn, may be severely damaged unless they are protected.

PROTECTION

Since blackbirds feed on weed seeds and harmful insects, it doesn't pay to reduce their numbers. This would also be difficult and costly, and it would have to be continued every year because migrant birds would soon replace those that were destroyed. There are, however, cheap and practical ways to protect the crops. Usually a combination of the following methods works best.

Crop Management

As damage occurs only near the roosts, which are used year after year, farmers in these areas are advised to take the following steps:

- Leave feeding areas for the blackbirds. For example, do not cultivate all harvested land until the harvest is over.
- Lure the birds from the main crop until it is harvested. You can do this by seeding oats early in narrow strips between the roost and the main crop.
- In areas beside trees, grow crops that are not harmed by blackbirds, such as flax, forage, pasture, sugar beets and potatoes. If you must grow cereal crops there, seed them early so that the bulk of the harvest is over before large flocks gather.

Frightening Devices

If you can't prevent damage by crop management, try frightening the blackbirds away from the crops. The methods given below are effective if they are started before the birds form the habit of feeding in a particular field. They must be carried out persistently so that the blackbirds do not get a chance to feed unmolested. Used haphazardly, these methods waste time and money.

ACETYLENE EXPLODERS of the improved type, with acetylene tanks, are the most effective. One of these protects up to 10 acres at a cost of about \$1 an acre. As soon as the birds start to feed in fields, place the exploders on a platform higher than the crop and close to the trees and waterholes where the birds perch and drink. Time them to fire about every two minutes.

You may need several exploders to a field. Move them frequently so that the birds won't grow accustomed to them.

You get a better effect if the exploder fires through a hole in the end of a small steel drum laid on its side. Remove the other end to make the drum serve as an amplifier.

If the blackbirds are in the field when the exploders are set, frighten them first by shooting. The birds may possibly be driven from the district by placing exploders in the night roost, but we need more experiments to verify this.

FIRECRACKERS. If you don't want to go to the expense of buying or renting an exploder, or if you are protecting a garden or small plot only, firecrackers are good enough. However, they require more attention and you must take care to avoid fire.

Buy the largest firecrackers, preferably of the "bulldog" type. Stick the fuses through a cotton rope, which burns slowly and fires the crackers at intervals of about five minutes. Tie the string of crackers to a leaning pole, above the crop, and protect them from wind and rain with a stovepipe. A bucket below the pipe catches the burning crackers and reduces the risk of fire.

SHOOTING frightens the birds from the fields, but it is time-consuming because they must not be allowed to return to feed. Shotgun ammunition is more expensive and less effective than that for the .22 rifle. The sound of a .22 bullet passing through the air and the crop frightens the birds. If you shoot from a platform, or on top of a truck, you can protect a large area. But remember that the .22 is dangerous within a mile and the bullets may ricochet from solid objects.

SCARECROWS are the least effective device and, if not moved frequently, the birds soon become accustomed to them. However, scarecrows have some value in combination with exploders.

INQUIRIES

For more information on blackbirds, consult these provincial officers:

British Columbia, C.L. Neilson, Parliament Buildings, Victoria;

Alberta, J. Gurba, Department of Agriculture, Edmonton;

Saskatchewan, C.L. Barrett, Administration Building, Regina;

Manitoba, D.R. Robertson, Norquay Building, Winnipeg;

Ontario, Prof. H.W. Goble, Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph;

Quebec, Fernand Godbout, 201 Boul. Cremazie Est, Montreal 11;

New Brunswick, D.B. Finnamore, Department of Agriculture, Fredericton;

Nova Scotia, M.E. Neary, Department of Agriculture, Truro;

Prince Edward Island, S. Wright, Deputy Minister, Department of Agriculture, Charlottetown;

Newfoundland, A.C. Badcock, Director, Agriculture Division, St. John's.

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