

# Hungry birds cost farmers millions in damage

UNIVERSITY PARK — Hungry birds annually are destroying between \$11 million and \$21 million worth of Pennsylvania's agricultural crops, or three to six percent of crop farmers' net income.

So conclude Penn State researchers who have done a massive survey of farmers, county extension directors and district game protectors in 64 of the state's 67 counties.

"What's happening," says John L. George, professor of wildlife management, "is that blackbirds, particularly the 'common grackle' and, to a lesser degree, the 'cowbird' and 'red winged' varieties, are feeding on crops, in flocks sometimes 100,000 strong, rarely reaching 1,000,000. "Our survey shows that blackbirds, as well as starlings and crows, are doing significant damage to many grains and vegetables. Moreover, it seems that blackbirds and starlings are only second to robins in destruction of cherries, blueberries and strawberries; and compete with and sometimes surpass robins in eating of grapes, apples and other fruits."

Seeking a solution to a growing nationwide pest problem, a team led by George surveyed 4500 or 12 percent of the state's largest commercial farms (with an average of 135 acres in crops).

Tallying 2413 usable responses and extrapolating to all Pennsylvania farms, they determined that

Ripening grain crops are

sustaining the heaviest damage, followed by fruit and livestock feedlots.

While, bushel-wise, the greatest losses are, respectively, in field corn, oats, sweet corn, grapes, cherries and apples, fruit farmers, especially grape growers, are losing the most on an individual basis—up to \$5000 an acre. Cherry and apple growers also are suffering significantly.

Overall, 5.7 percent of farms are sustaining "serious" losses (over 20 percent); 16.7 percent "moderate" losses (six to 20 percent); and 27.7 percent "slight" losses.

Damage to field corn, while heavy, is not economically significant. In 1979, birds destroyed an estimated 630,000 bushels worth \$1.4 million; but this comprises only half-a-percent of Pennsylvania's field corn crop. While some farms may sustain severe losses, far more field corn is lost overall to mechanical pickers and combines than to birds.

Grain damage occurs statewide, but most fruit loss is in the Southeast and in Erie County. The main livestock feedlot damage also occurs primarily in the Southeast, mostly in the winter when the ground is snow-covered—because several million birds, mainly blackbirds and some starlings—roost there instead of migrating south.

Most crop damage is being done by blackbirds, starlings and robins. But these birds also benefit farmers throughout most of the year

by eating large numbers of the insects which devour crops or affect livestock.

Disease transmission may be growing problem in Pennsylvania. Diseases of hogs, chickens and humans may be spread or caused by birds, and this issue should be studied.

The possibility of successful pest control varies with the crop and bird species, for economic and other reasons.

These are the major conclusions of a final report submitted in September to the researchers' sponsor, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

George and his colleagues—R.G. Wingard, professor of wildlife management, J.S. Wakeley, associate professor of wildlife ecology; and R.C. Mitchell, a research assistant, maintain that there are no easy ways to deal with the situation.

"While bird damage to agriculture is an age-old problem," George says, "today's realities require diverse and perhaps innovative solutions. For example, not only are pest control measures expensive but often the only truly effective long-term answer—killing the birds—is dangerous or often offensive to people, or requires special permission."

Significantly, he continues, the blackbird phenomenon is fast emerging as a central pest control issue. For in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, blackbird numbers have soared to a current

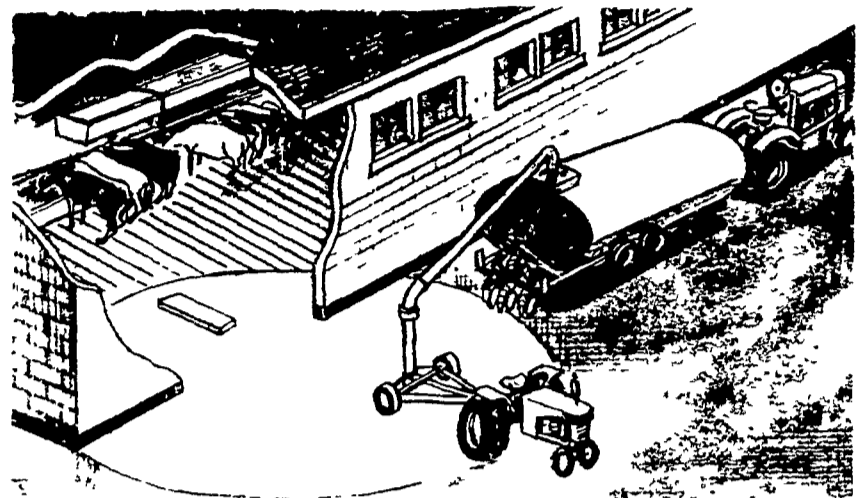
population in the hundreds of millions.

Today, George says

blackbirds have replaced starlings as the chief agricultural bird pest. Not

only do they outnumber starlings, but some are (Turn to Page D19)

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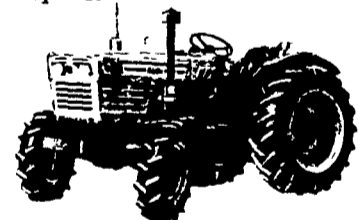
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