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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Extension FactSheet

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# Preventing and Controlling Blackbird Damage

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When people talk about damage by "blackbirds," they are often referring to a group of about 10 species, including red-winged blackbird, common grackle, brown-headed cowbird, and European starling. Blackbirds represent one of the most abundant groups of birds in North America, with populations of more than 1 billion individuals. Thus, it is not surprising that blackbirds can present problems to landowners, especially those raising crops. Blackbird damage to corn, sunflower, and rice can be severe in some areas. However, because blackbird populations have significantly declined in Ohio within the past few decades, less damage is occurring to crops. Another common complaint about blackbirds and starlings is that they form large, nocturnal roosting congregations, especially in winter. These roosts are often associated with loud noise, fecal accumulation, and nuisances near houses and parks.

As with all nuisance wildlife problems and damage concerns, changing your level of tolerance is the easiest solution. However, you must ultimately decide what level of damage warrants action. If you choose to manage your wildlife problems, remember that there seldom are quick solutions. The key to success is persistence.

## Damage Prevention and Control

### *Exclusion*

Exclusion of blackbirds from agricultural crops is practical only for small gardens and valuable fruit crops. In these cases, lightweight netting can be used to cover trees, bushes, or gardens. Individual ears of corn can be protected by placing paper bags over them after the silk has turned brown.

### *Cultural Methods and Habitat Modification*

Most severe damage occurs in fields that are within 5 miles of roosts. Planting crops that are not preferred food sources (such as soybeans, wheat, potatoes, or hay) in areas near roosts can help reduce damage. Some hybrid crops may be more resistant to damage than others. For example, corn with long or thick husks, sorghum with high tannin, and sunflowers with confectionery cultivars are more resistant to damage than other varieties. If attractive crops (e.g., corn or sunflower) are planted near a roost, then an alternative feeding site should be made available to the blackbirds. At the very least, be sure to plant fields at a time when they can mature with other nearby fields; this provides other feeding sites to the birds. Timely harvest of some crops, such as sweet corn, can also help to reduce damage.

### *Scare Tactics*

Frightening devices can be quite effective in protecting crops, especially for crops that are vulnerable for short periods (like sweet corn). Devices should be employed early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The most popular frightening device is a propane exploder, which can be manually or automatically deployed. Use at least one exploder for every 10 acres of crop, and change locations every few days. It is helpful to occasionally use other scare tactics as well, such as shooting a .22 caliber rifle and firing shell crackers. Other frightening techniques, including helium-filled balloons, radio-controlled model planes, reflective mylar tape, tape-recorded distress calls of birds, and scarecrows, have variable effectiveness. High-frequency noise systems are not effective.

### *Repellents and Toxicants*

No bird repellents are currently registered for maturing grain, sunflower, or fruit crops. There are some toxicants for blackbirds and starlings in feedlot situations. Check with USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services (614-469-5681) for product registration and use information.

### *Trapping and Shooting*

Most blackbirds (except for European starlings) are protected by federal and state laws, and trapping, shooting, or handling the birds is illegal without special permits. However, with the proper permission, certain species of blackbirds can be readily trapped in decoy traps. These traps can be used to temporarily reduce local populations in special situations. Check with state wildlife officers for current regulations. Shooting is not effective at reducing populations.



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