Honing In On Pest Birds

Facility managers use maintenance and exclusion tactics to repel unwelcome guests.

By Ron Harrison, Ph.D.

Each year, pest birds cause tens of millions of dollars in damage to machinery, automobiles, roofs, and ventilation systems. Bird droppings are high in nitrogen content, which can be corrosive to metals and other building materials.

But those droppings are more than visually unappealing. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this fecal material can contain disease organisms such as histoplasmosis, cryptococcus, and ectoparasites. These diseases can cause fever, chest pains, and coughing and, if left untreated, spread from the lungs to other organs, according to the CDC. They can also carry Salmonella and E. coli. Bird droppings containing these microbes can also lead to foodborne illness, some of which can be fatal.

The World Health Organization reports that birds are also the principal or amplifying hosts for viruses associated with eastern and western equine encephalitis, St. Louis encephalitis, West Nile virus, and even some influenza viruses.

The types of birds that can affect a facility and its surrounding property depend on the location and geography. Pest pigeons and sparrows breed in urban and suburban areas, transmit diseases, and can destroy structures with their droppings. House sparrows, while only a few inches tall, can outcompete native songbirds with high volumes of noise at all hours of the day.

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An IPM program can do more than keep birds away; it can also help make a facility a "no-fly" zone for other types of pests, like insects.

Integrated Approach

Facility managers (fms) can manage pest birds through several prevention and control measures that fall under an Integrated Pest (bird) Management (IPM) program. IPM proactively controls pests through sanitation, facility maintenance, and exclusion tactics. Chemicals are used only as a last resort and then only in highly targeted treatments. IPM programs specifically target the type of pests threatening a facility.

The CDC now promotes IPM as a "science-based, commonsense approach for managing populations of disease vectors and public health pests." Controlling a bird infestation is a three step process: inspection, implementation, and follow-up. An effective IPM plan involves comprehensive inspections and risk evaluations; a focus on prevention that keeps sustainability in mind; and ongoing monitoring, documentation, and communication.

Fms can work with pest management professionals to identify problem species and look for feeding, roosting, nesting, and loitering areas. Inspections should be completed at different times of the day, because bird activity changes.

If pest bird populations are present, the pest professional will work to modify the habitat. A few tactics like applying nets, gels, bird wire, and coils can make a facility unattractive to birds. Fms should keep in mind that these treatments need to be monitored regularly. Other options such as mechanical traps and chemical treatments available as well; these steps might be necessary to solve a particularly stubborn bird problem.

Repel And Maintain

Many pest birds, particularly pigeons, prefer to roost on flat surfaces and can often be found on roof ledges. Once they nest there, they are not easily discouraged by repellants or relocation techniques. With this in mind, the best

way to stop birds from roosting on a roof is before they start. Facility management (FM) staff should regularly inspect roofs and rooftop HVAC units for any openings, which serve as nesting and roosting sites. Also, standing water should be swept or mopped after rain, because the water can serve as an impromptu birdbath.

Like many pests, nuisance birds will be attracted to a facility if they can find a free meal there. The smallest scraps can entice an avian invasion, so any community areas should be kept clean and clear of food debris. FM staff should make sure trash cans and recycling bins are lined, covered, and emptied on a regular basis. The same goes for sidings and docks, which should also be kept free of debris and other residues that attract birds. Paving these areas and cleaning them daily may be needed to help keep birds away.

Fms can also remind regular occupants as well as visitors to keep break areas clean and to never feed birds close to the facility. It's also important to remember that birds loitering outside may find their way inside a facility. Once in, they may find it difficult to get out or they might find conditions adequate for them to set up house. In those cases, birds may need to be trapped or physically removed.

Clean Up Carefully

For dealing with bird droppings, fms may want to discuss a removal process with their service provider. If in-house staff handles the removal, at minimum the following steps should be taken before any extensive cleanup begins:

- Workers, particularly those with weakened immune systems, should be informed of possible health risks.
- Workers should wear protective clothing (e.g., disposable coveralls, boots, gloves, respirators).
- Hands and other exposed skin should be washed when removal is finished.
- Dust control measures, such as containing the area with plastic sheeting, should be implemented.
- The area should be wet down to prevent inhalation and to reduce infection risk.

With a strong partnership, fms and their pest management service partners can apply the key measures that keep away pest birds. This can also help prevent other types of pests from infesting a facility. TFM

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