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Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Wildlife Services
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Fact Sheet
MANAGING VULTURE DAMAGE

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Background

The turkey vulture (Cathartes aura), a historic resident of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and the black vulture (Coragyps atratus), a recent immigrant, are present in these states throughout the year. Turkey vultures have become increasingly abundant throughout the Northeast and black vultures have extended their range northward into Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania during the past 50 years. Property damage and nuisance problems have been attributed to both species. Livestock predation problems have been attributed to black vultures, and both species jeopardize aircraft safety when in or around airport environments and are involved in wildlife-aircraft collisions (birdstrikes).

Identification

The turkey vulture is the larger of the two species, with an average weight of four pounds and a wingspan up to six feet. It is predominantly dark brown-black with a featherless, bright red (adult) or brown (juvenile) head and a relatively long, narrow tail. The undersides of the wings are gray except along the leading edges, which are black. The black vulture weighs less than four pounds and has a wingspan of less than five feet. It is also predominantly black including a dark gray to black head (juvenile and adult). The tail is shorter and wider (fanned) than that of the turkey vulture. The undersides of the wings are dark gray with large white patches near the wing tips. Turkey vultures have been reported to live up to 16 years of age and black vultures up to 25 years.

Legal Status

Turkey vultures and black vultures are Federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The State of New Jersey classifies both species as protected non-game birds. In order to trap, kill, relocate, or otherwise handle a vulture or its eggs, a Federal permit is required. A permit from the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife Endangered and Nongame Species program is also required. Federal and State permit applications are available from USDA

APHIS Wildlife Services program (address above). Permit applications are processed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (413-253-8643) and the State of New Jersey Nongame Wildlife Permits (908-735-5450). Once permits have been applied for, inquiries about their status can be directed to those agencies respectively. *USDA APHIS Wildlife Services offers technical and operational assistance to the public and other government agencies and is not the permitting agency.*

General Biology

Although vultures occasionally prey on domestic fowl and livestock, they feed primarily on carrion and have adapted to specialize in scavenging carcasses. They have keen eyesight and highly developed sense of smell compared with other bird species. Vultures have strong bills for pulling and tearing, but relatively "weak" feet, making it difficult to lift or carry much. These birds do not build nests, but lay their eggs in dense thickets, in hollow logs, on rock ledges, in caves and even in abandoned buildings.

Usually two eggs are laid and these hatch in approximately 40 days. Young are cared for by adults for about 3 months. Vultures congregate in large communal roosts typically located in wooded hollows or ravines with drainage into lakes or rivers

Occasionally vultures roost in backyard trees, in town, or even on suburban rooftops. These roosts are used throughout the year but are largest during the late autumn through early spring. Roosts are dynamic and vultures may use different roost sites each night. Black vultures and turkey vultures may roost together. Occasionally, vultures can be observed roosting on water towers or radio/microwave towers.

Damage

Nuisance and property damage problems involving turkey vultures and black vultures include unwanted congregations of these birds around areas of human activity (homes, schools, churches, shopping areas) resulting in accumulations of feces on trees and lawns, residential and commercial buildings, electrical and radio transmission towers, and other structures. Accumulations of droppings can result in unpleasant odors emanating from roost sites. Accumulations on electrical transmission towers have resulted in arcing and localized power outages. Public water supplies have been contaminated with fecal coliform bacteria as a result of droppings entering water towers, springs, or other sources. Other property damage attributed to vultures includes tearing, and sometimes consuming, asphalt shingles and rubber roofing material, rubber, vinyl, or leather upholstery from cars, boats, tractors, and other vehicles, latex window caulking, and plastic flowers at cemeteries. Most damage of this type is attributed to black vultures, although turkey vultures have been implicated in some situations. Damage to livestock by black vultures may involve plucking the eyes and eating the tongues of newborn, down, or sick livestock, disemboweling young livestock, killing and feeding on domestic fowl, and general flesh wounds from bites.

Concentrations of vultures can be hazardous to aircraft, especially when sanitary landfills are situated in close proximity to flight paths at airports

Damage Control Methods

As is the case with all wildlife damage problems, the best approach is to consider and apply a number of safe, effective, legal and practical techniques and methods. An integrated vulture damage management program may include habitat management, harassment, and/or population management.

Habitat Management. The elimination of vulture food, roost trees, and nest sites will reduce the number of birds in the area. Clean farming practices that include prompt carcass disposal (burial, incineration, etc.) and protected lambing/calving will reduce available food sources. Black vultures are often attracted by and feed on placentas before damaging a newborn calf or lamb. The scent of afterbirth can attract vultures from a great distance. Disposal of afterbirth, to the extent possible, will help to reduce this attraction.

Where vultures are creating nuisance and property damage problems by perching on rooftops, installation of a wire pulled taut about 8" above and parallel to the ridge line of the roof will discourage or prevent birds from perching. It is important to maintain a high tension on the wire so that vultures cannot push it down, and to maintain the correct height above the ridge line so they cannot straddle or perch beneath it.

The use of tactile repellents such as Tanglefoot, Roost-no-more, or double sided tape may discourage perching in situations where wire installation is not possible or practical. Barriers such as overhead monofilament grid lines and netting may also be used to exclude vultures from protected areas.

Although extreme, removal of roost site trees and pruning of branches will induce birds to abandon a traditional roost site.

Harassment. Vultures may be harassed away from an area with the use of pyrotechnics fired from a 15-millimeter launcher (starter pistol), shell crackers fired from a 12-gauge shotgun or, propane cannons. Prior to initiating a harassment program, consult your state and local laws regarding the possession and use of firearms and pyrotechnic launchers, and review firearm discharge, noise and bird sanctuary ordinances. When using pyrotechnics devices, comply with all regulations and instructions, particularly those pertaining to the use of hearing and eye protection. When using shell crackers with a 12ga. shotgun, it is recommended that a break- action firearm be used to allow examination of the bore after each discharge to check for material that may have lodged in the barrel. Pyrotechnics, pistol launchers, shell crackers, and propane cannons can be purchased from sources listed in the accompanying supply leaflet.

In order to be effective, harassment with pyrotechnics and shell crackers must be diligent, persistent, and initiated as soon as the problem is recognized. Birds that have been allowed to habituate to an area will be more difficult to scare away. To harass vultures away from a large, traditional communal roost, considerable effort must be employed. Beginning at dusk as birds approach the roost site, and continuing until dark, fire pyrotechnics at roosting birds until the flock breaks up and disperses; this may have to be repeated each night for up to one week or more, since different vultures may be present each night. Continue to use

pyrotechnic harassment to divide the flock into smaller groups and to chase them from the area. Since they have a shorter range (25-50 yards), 15mm pyrotechnics fired from a handheld launcher are recommended for urban/suburban areas (subject to local laws). Shell crackers (12ga.), with a range of more than 100 yards are more appropriate of ruse in rural/agricultural situations.

Vultures can be repelled by the distress calls of other birds including crows, starlings, and blackbirds. Recorded bird distress calls are commercially available from sources listed in the accompanying leaflet. Taped distress calls should be amplified over the roost area, not continually, but for short periods of 10 - 15 seconds, except during the last half-hour before dark. During this time the tape should be played continually until dark.

In areas where vultures have habituated to noise harassment or where local ordinances preclude noise harassment, roosts have been dispersed by helium-filled mylar balloons tethered by mylar tape and allowed to rise into the roost trees. Habituation to this technique may occur within several months to a few years. Vultures have also been reported to be repelled by presence of a dead vulture suspended in or near a roost tree or structure. In one documented case a vulture which died and hung from a radio tower for several months resulted in the abandonment of the tower as a roost. Federal and state permits are required before this method can be employed.

Population Management. In those situations where vultures have habituated to harassment with pyrotechnics, and no longer exhibit avoidance behavior, the scaring effect of this technique may be restored by shooting a few birds. Vultures are intelligent and respond quickly when one or two members of a flock are killed. Removal of persistent birds from a local population increases efficacy of harassment programs, ensuring that birds remain responsive to these techniques rather than habituating to them. This technique reinforces ongoing harassment, not to significantly reduce the local vulture population. In most states, vultures can be shot with a 12 ga. shotgun (2 3/4" or 3" shells, No. 4 lead shot) or a rifle (centerfire rifles, such as .223, .270, or .30-06). **In NJ, only a shotgun may be used to shoot vultures.** Shotguns are the typical method for urban/suburban areas, and rifles may be used in more remote locales. Use of a rifle to shoot vultures must be specifically requested on the permit applications, and included as a legal technique on permits. Display of a dead vulture in the roost trees or structure can provide an additional deterrent effect, but this condition must be specifically authorized on permits. Nonlethal methods should be employed prior to or concurrent with use of shooting. Federal and state permits are required before shooting can be implemented. Permit applications can be obtained from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) or from the USDA APHIS Wildlife Services program at the address and phone number listed above. The completed application must be submitted to the FWS, accompanied by a $25.00 processing fee. Once the permit is obtained, comply fully with its conditions, including the annual report of the number of vultures taken. Carry the permit with you during conduct of control activities.

Special Note:

***********Recommendations in this leaflet should not be implemented if they would be in conflict with the Endangered Species Act of 1973.************