Controlling Starlings

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
CONTROLLING Starlings

European starlings were introduced into this country about 1890. After living in a small area of the northeast for some thirty years, they rapidly extended their range to cover most of temperate North America.

Starlings have long, straight bills, which are yellow in the spring but dark-colored the rest of the year. The plumage is dark, blue-black and flecked with gold. In flight their triangular shape and short tail distinguish starlings from our native blackbirds. They generally nest in a hole in a tree or building, laying six to seven light blue eggs in a clutch. There are one or two broods per year.

Principal complaints against starlings arise from their irritating noise and filth in roosting areas. Where starlings congregate in large numbers, they can cause severe losses in field crops, small fruits, and stored grain. They play a role in the spread of parasites and disease to man and domestic animals. In addition, the impact of starlings on our native birds through competition for food and nesting places is important.

At present there are no lethal chemicals registered for spraying on roosting starlings, or for application to the roost site, that will kill the birds on contact.

Control in Temporary Tree Roosts
Late fall and early spring tree roosts are usually temporary stopovers for the birds on their way to summer nesting sites or winter roosts.

Starlings can be repelled from these temporary roosts by using sound. Noise repellents must be started as soon as the birds flock into the trees and should be continued until the last bird leaves. Scaring must begin early in the evening when there is sufficient light for the birds to find an alternate roost. Devices such as automatic gas exploders, fireworks, shotguns with exploding crackers, and recorded starling distress cries, are effective noise repellents. Three to four consecutive evenings of persistent sound will usually be enough to establish the birds in another roost.

A more drastic control measure is the complete removal or heavy pruning of trees which form the roost. Unfortunately this may cause the birds to move to nearby buildings or less desirable sites.
Control in Winter Roosts
Winter roosts are more permanent, usually lasting from December through mid-March. These roosts often contain larger numbers as well as several species of birds. The accumulation of droppings, noise, and damage to adjacent agricultural activities can cause severe problems.

These roosts can be moved with properly timed and persistent use of the scaring tools mentioned in the previous section. In moving winter roosts, several factors should be taken into consideration. There is no assurance that it will be moved to a less desirable location and a large roost may be broken into several smaller roosts and compound the problem.

Control on Buildings
Properly timed and persistently used scaring devices can be used to remove starling flocks from buildings.

Some buildings are attractive to starlings because there are ledges suitable for roosting. Ledges can be modified with wood or sheet metal so the slant is too steep for roosting.

Chemical repellents, because of their sticky nature may repel birds for several months. Reapplication is usually necessary in order to maintain maximum effectiveness for longer periods.

Starlings have been kept from roosting inside open sheds with rope firecrackers and automatic exploders. Toxic perches are registered for use in buildings but must be installed by professional pest control operators.

Control in Feedlots
Starlings often flock into farm feedlots during the winter when other foods are scarce. If scaring devices can be used effectively without disturbing the livestock or poultry, this method may be more effective than trying to reduce the starling population. Trapping or poisoning starlings can be frustrating when dealing with large numbers of birds. Since starlings will travel several miles from their roost and do not always feed in the same place daily, a farmer could eliminate many hundreds of the birds without seeing a reduction in visiting birds. Several farmers cooperating in a reduction program may obtain noticeable results.

Starlings can be trapped fairly easily in large, self-operating decoy traps.

A chemical widely tested for starling control in feedlots is 3-chloro-p-toluidine hydrochloride. Impregnated in pellets, this chemical is available as a ready-mixed bait called Starlicide. This slow-acting chemical is relatively harmless to mammals but toxic to birds.

Another commercial bait, Avitrol, is also registered for feedlot use but only by professional pest control operators.

Control in Orchards
Starlings respond readily to scaring devices so the use of automatic exploders, recorded starling distress cries, AV-alarm, etc., can be quite effective in orchards. When starlings are very numerous, it may be necessary to reduce their numbers. Decoy traps are also efficient and inexpensive for this purpose.