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Further research into parrots and fruit damage

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Parrots are major pests of Western Australia's South-West fruit-growing industry. The amount of damage they can cause to ripening fruit in orchards varies from season to season, but in the last two years these colourful birds have become an even greater problem.

The Agriculture Protection Board has started further research aimed at determining how extensive damage to fruit can be prevented.

Surveys

Research conducted in 1970-75 into parrots as pests of fruit crops and reported in the Journal of Agriculture No. 1, 1984 indicated that small numbers of parrots caused little economic damage. Parrots start to eat the ripening fruit in late summer-early autumn if their natural food supplies become depleted.

A survey carried out by the Manjimup Fruit Growers Association in February 1984 indicated that parrot damage and control methods cost apple growers $750,000 in 1983-84. In that season orchardists had shot almost 11,000 parrots and had spent more than $75,000 on shooting and patrolling their crops to prevent further damage.

A survey carried out by the Agriculture Protection Board in the Donnybrook and Manjimup areas in March 1984 confirmed heavy fruit losses. In many orchards some trees had been nearly stripped of fruit by parrots. The red or sweeter varieties of apples were most affected and other varieties which normally suffered little damage were also eaten.

Although the red-capped parrot causes most damage, the western rosella and the Port Lincoln parrot (or 'twenty-eight') also invade orchards. Another occasional problem is the long-billed, white-tailed black cockatoo. This south-western species of the black cockatoo is considered rare and endangered, with a population of only a few thousand birds within its range.

Trials

Trials aimed at reducing the level of fruit damage by parrots began at the Department of Agriculture's Stoneville Horticulture Research Station in February 1984. These preliminary investigations involved the use of acoustic and visual frightening devices to prevent parrots from settling in orchards.

Combinations of acoustic and visual scaring devices show promise. Other methods tested included the use of chemical repellents and netting to prevent parrots from attacking the fruit.

The Agriculture Protection Board has allocated $100,000 for further research in the 1984-85 fruit-ripening season. Two orchards have been selected in the Donnybrook area to further test the effectiveness of acoustic and visual scaring devices. At least two combinations of scaring tactics are being evaluated during these investigations which started in December 1984.

The Department of Agriculture, in conjunction with the Agriculture Protection Board, will continue preliminary testing of other scaring devices, new repellent materials and other methods of reducing parrot damage at Stoneville Research Station.

Research to be carried out by a contract research officer with the Department of Conservation and Land Management at Manjimup in 1985 will determine why parrots invade apple orchards, especially when their natural food supplies are plentiful. This research will investigate the feeding behaviour of parrot populations in relation to damage in orchards. All known information on fruit damage by parrots will be collated and evaluated.