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Bird problems and control in Western Australia

John L. Long

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ALTHOUGH wild birds are mostly beneficial in Western Australia, there are certain species which are damaging to agriculture and the home gardener.

Little research has been carried out here to assess the economic importance of those which are pests to farmers and back-yard orchardists. Probably those of most importance are the emu, galah and the various members of the parrot and cockatoo family.

Emus are known to do extensive damage to cereal crops in areas on the edge of the arable agricultural land. In the northern and eastern wheatbelt and on isolated farms in the Great Southern, they are a considerable nuisance.

The galah is a problem to a large number of farmers in northern and eastern areas, both in the grain fields where patches on the edges of crops are denuded of heads, and amongst bag stacks and in storage sheds and silos.

The cockatoos and parrots are a very real problem to fruit growers, especially the white-tailed black cockatoo, which does extensive damage in some apple orchards in the South-West of Western Australia. The “28” or Port Lincoln is a menace mainly in the South-West and at times elsewhere, feeding on pip-fruits and almonds, and is a great apple orchard raider. King Parrots do considerable damage when large flocks settle in fruit orchards, particularly apples. Smokers will attack fruit with the main damage being done in small orchards, particularly of almonds. The Western rosella is disliked for its partiality to cultivated land, attacking orchard trees about homesteads and also garden crops.

Crows can be a nuisance to orchardists and sheep farmers. They are charged with lamb killing as well as being a nuisance around killing yards. They have been known to attack ripening oranges and to take bees from hives.

Silverseyes are a problem to backyard soft-fruit growers in the metropolitan area and elsewhere.
Little corellas in the Kimberley region are sometimes a nuisance in irrigation plots and gardens. Also in this area, geese have become a problem in rice fields. Initial reports of the geese completely destroying rice crops as a result of enormous flocks feeding on them, were found to be exaggerated, but they still cause appreciable damage to some crops.

In pastoral areas eagles are sometimes a nuisance during lambing, although it is suspected that the beneficial work done by them could outweigh any damage they may cause.

Doves sometimes damage newly seeded gardens and eat feed in poultry yards in the metropolitan area. Feral pigeons have become a local problem in railway yards in the city and in the Toodyay township.

Swallows can sometimes be a nuisance, fouling public buildings and private dwellings. More recently, plovers have become a hazard to jet aircraft landing and taking off from Guildford Airport.

Birds are a problem in most countries of the world and although a great deal of research has been done overseas there is still the need for more. All sorts of procedures have been evolved to cope with these problems, but generally they are only partially successful. Techniques must remain highly varied, for what works in one situation may not be as effective in another, even with the same species of bird.

**CONTROL METHODS**

Frightening devices such as automatic acetylene (calcium carbide) exploders are available. Water dripping on calcium carbide causes the formation of acetylene gas which is exploded at specific intervals. The noise is non-injurious to birds, but may be objectionable if used close to residential areas. This has proved a failure in large areas of crop against emus, but may have application in small areas in the South-West and in small orchards. Some success has been achieved in America and Scandinavia, by recording the distress cry of the bird in question and replaying over an amplifier.

Guns have been extensively used as frightening devices and to kill offending birds, but usually shooting requires considerable effort and time for lasting results.

Skyrockets, Roman candles and firecrackers, inserted at intervals in slow burning fuse ropes, have been useful in America in driving birds from crops. This type of device is, however, dangerous, especially in our summer climate, because of the fire hazard generally existing at this period.

Whirling bright coloured or shiny objects act as scare devices if changed frequently. The degree of control achieved by this type of scarer is usually proportional to the number of objects used. More success is obtained by placing out many gadgets and changing the position and type of device regularly. The whirling or curling motion, along with the resultant flashes of light produced in a light to moderate breeze, is said to effectively discourage birds which are causing damage in small gardens. Some suggested devices are aluminium strips, plastic or metallic propellers. Their use has been especially effective in America when combined with some noise producing device.

Fruit trees and vines can be protected by enclosing in fine mesh wire. Encasing the fruit itself in plastic or paper bags as it ripens, also affords good protection.

The alert expression of the emu shown here is typical of most birds. They are clever and their control is difficult.
Bird scaring devices such as the carbide gun shown here have been used extensively in various parts of the world. They are generally effective for only a short time as birds quickly become accustomed to their noise.

However, these methods are uneconomical, except in small areas where a single vine or tree is being damaged.

**Ecological Control**

Ecological control is occasionally helpful and was so in the control of the magpie geese in northern rice crops. The key to the control of geese is an understanding of the birds’ breeding habits. The depth of water and the density of sedge growing in it must meet certain critical requirements for nesting. It is now believed that in most seasons geese will only be a minor nuisance. They will become less important if development of the rice fields proceeds on a face and destroys the breeding grounds in advance.

**Traps**

Live traps for certain bird species such as “28’s,” crows and pigeons have been used with some success. An efficient crow trap is illustrated and its mechanism explained in a Department of Agriculture Leaflet No. 2838. A similar trap is used for “28’s.”

Pigeon traps employ the use of “bob wires.” These are free swinging wire rods, which swing upward and inward and are spaced at 1½ in. intervals, to allow the birds to push through. The efficiency of these traps is improved by having a live specimen as a lure or baiting the trap with a suitable food supply.

**Nest Destruction**

Destruction of nests, removal of nesting sites and excluding from nesting places in and on buildings, are helpful with such birds as pigeons and swallows.

**Poisons**

Generally, when bird problems occur in orchards, gardens, and so on, it is extremely hazardous to use materials toxic to humans and pets.

Emus and galahs can be controlled with strychnine and grain under most circumstances. Techniques are described in Leaflets 2831 and 2916.

There are few repellants on the market and usually those which turn up are unsuccessful.
Wedgetailed eagles are poisoned in outlying areas by means of smearing strychnine on carcasses which are being preyed upon by these birds. The recommended method is to insert the strychnine in slits cut into the carcass.

Crows have been controlled by the use of phosphorised rabbit poison smeared on slabs of meat or pieces of carcase.

At present, in the major fruit growing districts in the South Western portion of the State, there is little an orchardist can do but shoot or frighten the birds away continually.

UNPROTECTED AND VERMIN SPECIES

Many people do not know which birds are declared "vermin," in which areas, and also those which are unprotected and therefore can be exterminated.

Doves, silvereyes, goshawks, collared sparrowhawks, little falcons, budgerigars, ravens, crows, little crows, goldfinches, feral pigeons, black cormorants, "28's," western rosellas, white-tailed black cockatoos, smokers, little corellas, king parrots and galahs are unprotected and may therefore be destroyed where and whenever they are considered pests.

The wedgetailed eagle, "28" or port lincoln and the western rosella are declared vermin throughout the State.

The white-breasted sea-eagle, white-tailed black cockatoo, smoker, little corella, king parrot, galah and emu are declared vermin only in certain areas. Most of these can be destroyed elsewhere as they are unprotected.

The white-breasted sea-eagle may only be destroyed in the Roebourne and Tableland Vermin Districts.

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Cover Picture

To those interested in C. A. Gardner's "Trees of Western Australia" series this month's issue will be notable for the appearance of tree No. 100 in the series.

This is no mean feat, and by way of celebration we have used one of Mr. Gardner's water colours—Salmon Gums—as our cover picture for this month, for Mr. Gardner, when not studying plants in a professional way, likes to paint them in his spare time.

Not that he gets much spare time after keeping the Journal supplied with articles and drawings in the "Trees" series, as well as his work on preparing the Flora of Western Australia. Each of the drawings takes from 20 to 40 hours of concentrated work. Mr. Gardner uses the slow but effective single dot shading technique and is one of the few illustrators who have not abandoned it. The drawings will later be used in a detailed study of West Australian eucalypts, which is now being prepared.

The "Trees of Western Australia" series started in 1952, and there has been a continuous flow of these articles ever since. Over 50 eucalypts remain to be covered before the series ends. Mr. Gardner collected most of the specimens illustrated (and also named many of the species) during his travels all over the State as Government Botanist.

He retired in July, 1960, and settled down to finish his work on the Flora of Western Australia. The first volume of this major work is now almost ready for publication.