

THE USE OF LIVE TRAPS TO REMOVE STARLINGS AND PROTECT AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

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Much has already been said and written about the use of live traps for the control of starlings in the State of Washington and our efforts have evidently been viewed with interest for we have received letters and questions about our program from all over the world.

Our interest in the possibilities of the live trap began back in 1960 when spring and summer surveys revealed a high nesting population and an increasing percentage of bird damage to a very valuable cherry growing industry. This damage was mainly attributable to the local flocks of juvenile starlings.

Over the years we have learned much about the habits and characteristics of the starlings and apply this knowledge to the present day program.

Adult birds strive to bring off two broods. The first brood leaves the nest in early May and the second in mid-June. Small flocks of juveniles will then develop in widely scattered areas, usually in irrigated pastures, throughout the county. Even the city reared bird will join its country cousin in these feeding and training areas.

These young birds are easily caught and we find that traps located in these communal areas, or along flyways will reduce local populations before cherries become ripe. We also strive to intercept them enroute to the orchards.

Traps located in prime nesting areas will take a few adult starlings during April and May. However the catch will pick up significantly as the young leave the nest.

Records kept of one man's monthly catches over the years reveal that the average take for the month of May is about 700 starlings and the average for June exceeds 7,000.

In our program in Washington the individual growers are encouraged to maintain their own traps. Bureau personnel will assist the individual in locating his trap, provide live decoys, arrange for necessary bait and periodically check back to keep the area under observation. This portion of the program, along with maintenance of Bureau owned traps, results in establishment of a daily route type operation and enables one man to cover fairly large areas in one day.

This type of program requires extreme mobility on the part of our personnel and is one reason we choose to keep the style of trap used simple and easily handled by one man.

The trap we find most suitable is an adaptation of the "Australian Crow Trap", that measures 6' x 6' x 8'. It is constructed in panel sections and may be put up by one man after a little experience in about 15 minutes and easily taken down and ready for transportation to a new location in about 10 minutes.

Many types and styles of entrance panels have been tested. The one most effective and adaptable to our program is made of 1/2 inch exterior plywood 8' x 16" containing three entrance slots, 24" x 1 3/4". These slots are spaced nine inches from both ends and three inches apart in the mid portion of the panel.

Striving to always improve our program and because we felt that the small trap has a saturation point, we began to think in terms of increased trap area volume, and have experimented by joining two or more small traps together. The results have been most encouraging even though at the time we were working with wintering concentrations at cattle feedlots.

The results led us to envision a large trap mounted on a trailer and capable of being handled by one man. Our wishes were granted in April of 1965 when the Bureau was presented with a unit that measured 7' wide, 6' high and 20' long. This trap mounted on a two wheel trailer and fully equipped with hitch and trailer lights is legal for highway travel in the State of Washington. The unit was constructed and donated by the West Valley Kiwanis Club

of Yakima, Washington.

On several occasions this trap has rapidly reduced local flock buildup and contributed greatly to crop protection. It especially lends itself to pasture areas where livestock may be grazing, an area we feel to be a prime trap location site.

In dealing with these crop menacing situations one must appreciate that the local problem will not necessarily involve a dramatic eye catching number of starlings, but quite often consists of flocks of 500 birds or less. However, daily visits by even this many has cost an individual complete loss of a crop.

Starlings have accepted much of the State of Washington for nesting and the problem has spread to include fall ripening crops such as grapes and blueberries. Live trapping programs during 1966 continued to demonstrate the values of the live trap as a tool in protecting a variety of agricultural products.