

UC Agriculture & Natural Resources

Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference

Title

Urbanized wildlife

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7s75b569>

Journal

Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference, 6(6)

ISSN

0507-6773

Author

Pope, Robert L.

Publication Date

1974

URBANIZED WILDLIFE

ROBERT L. POPE, Botanist-Zoologist, Environmental Biologist and Consultants, Garden Grove, California

ABSTRACT: Man with his continual movement and his need to construct has devastated the wilderness. Provided with man's year-round lush vegetation, his sheltered and protected area, wildlife has adapted to urbanization.

Urbanized wildlife is not always tolerated by man. Management of vertebrate pests in urban areas is specialized. Toxic baits or hazardous techniques are avoided to prevent exposure to people, pets, and other non-targets. Birds, as woodpeckers, crows, and hawks, which are urbanized wildlife in wooden and other structures of parks, residences, and airports, can be controlled by wire screens, topping trees, or removing their food source. Rodents, as rabbits and ground squirrels, can be controlled by proper placement and safe management of toxic baits. If uncontained, their predators, as snakes, also migrate to urban districts. Other reptiles, as lizards, are also intolerable to some human urbanites. Like migratory skunks disrupting turf in urban areas, control of insects will reduce lizard and skunk populations. By live trapping raccoons and opossums and moving them away from urbanization, undue harm can also be avoided to these occasional visitors.

Humane control methods compatible with all life -- the vertebrate pest, man and his pets, and non-targets, should be considered especially when dealing with urbanized wildlife.

The movement of Homo sapiens is impossible to halt as conditions exist today. If an area has industry with the hope of employment, tourist attractions, and offers entertainment, provides facilities for church, school and recreational pursuits, and for many gives welfare as a means to support one's self without labor, why not move to an urbanized area? So man is enticed. Since the turn of the industrial revolution, masses of people have been on the move.

Before urbanization, wildlife depended upon the wilderness for its existence. Available food supported so many. Predaceous animals, disease, and other natural elements eliminated the old and the weak. The natural scheme was thus balanced.

The movement of man and his need to construct has devastated the wilderness, and has concentrated the "critters" into smaller areas. But some of these "little guys" have eyeballed man's lush year-round vegetation and his sheltered, protected areas and have adapted to urbanization. These are "Urbanized Wildlife."

Urbanized wildlife is not always tolerated by man and requires a speciality in management considering people and pets without exposing them to toxic baits and dangerous techniques. Recognition of signs, habits, and behavior is required to solve a specific pestiferous urban problem.

Birds are probably the first animals to take advantage of man's urban environment. For years they have utilized his buildings for perching, roosting and nesting, and have fed upon his crops, landscapes, and urban wastes. Some avian urbanites are enjoyed by man. Others have contributed to the misery of his environment. Woodpeckers, as the California or acorn woodpecker (Melanerpes formicivorus bairdi), are some of the undesirables. Some buildings and utility poles would likely fall over if all of the acorns embedded in them were removed. Wood shingles are prime targets of the woodpeckers. If it is necessary to kill these birds, a permit must be obtained from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. A few birds may be controlled by nailing squares of 1/4 inch mesh wire cloth over the drill holes to discourage further damage. The application of greasy or sticky type commercial bird repellents may work, but tend to stain wooden buildings; therefore, their use is limited (Cummings, 1964).

The crow (Corvus brachyrhynchos brachyrhynchos Brehm.), a most adaptable urban dweller, seeks food discarded by man. Parking lots, drive-in theaters, and trash bins provide popcorn and other pickings. Scavaging is generally tolerated until the birds come home to roost in an urban backyard. Fighting noisily with each other and their dropping nuts on

tin patio roofs during the early morning hours is unacceptable. Most of us are aware of typical management procedures used in the field, as shell-crackers, poison baits, or hanging a dead crow, but these are not well accepted in urban residential areas. A temporary solution can be provided by topping the roosting trees to a height of 20-30 feet.

Pigeons, gulls, starlings, and blackbirds are familiar urbanized birds. It is not practical to discuss all of the urbanized avian fauna. Ones of importance that can be readily controlled should not be overlooked, namely predaceous hawks as Buteo borealis borealis Gmelin. Airports, located in urban industrial areas, offer open spaces for "critters" which are crowded out by urban development in surrounding fields. These are mostly rabbits, ground squirrels, mice, rats, and gophers. These animals are soon followed by large predaceous birds, the hawks. I have seen \$40,000 worth of damage to a jet engine from inhaling a red-tailed hawk. Continual rodent surveillance and control measures should be included in every airport operation. Most airports, although fenced, attract domestic dogs, cats, and kids; therefore, the use of anticoagulant baits is best if chemical control is used. For safe management any dead critters resulting from the control program should be removed daily to prevent carrion feeders, as vultures (Cathartes aura septentrionalis Wied.), and others from gathering in the busy area.

Rabbits, particularly resident cottontails (Sylvilagus auduboni sactidiegi Miller), cause extensive damage to turf and ornamentals in new residential developments adjacent to canyons, foothills, and open spaces. Exclusion by rabbit fencing is not well accepted in expensive urban areas especially of front yard landscaping. Clean, non-poisoned grain placed in nursery flats or trays in the surrounding rabbit infested area will sometimes curtail feeding on ornamentals until the plants are established. If clean grain fails anticoagulant baits may be used to limit the population. These baits may also be combined with melted parafin and molded in paper cups with an inserted stick in one end to make moisture resistant rabbit popsicles. These can be placed inconspicuously amongst the shrubbery where the damage is occurring. A program of this type is generally well accepted and gladly funded by the homeowners suffering the loss.

Ground squirrels (Spermophilus beechyii beechyii Richardson), well adapted to man's environment, burrow into and feed upon his embankments, turf, and ornamentals. Limited populations are easily controlled by the following method. Insert a funnel into one end of a four foot length of garden hose. Insert the other end into an active burrow and pour one to two coffee cans (one pound size) of gasoline into the funnel. Remove the hose from the burrow; stuff a newspaper into it to spook the squirrel back into the hole and shovel several scoops of dirt over it. The fumes will do the rest. Gasoline can be used near plant roots with little or no damage where other gases, such as carbon bisulphide or methyl bromide, are highly dangerous and injurious.

Summer feeding by small rodents soon depletes the weed seed in open fields making urban green belts inviting to the hungry "critters." Their migration into greener pastures are pursued by their just-as-hungry reptilian predators, the snakes. Although all are beneficial in rodent control, all snakes are not usually tolerated in an urban backyard, park, or playground. An effort to exclude the poisonous species, such as rattlesnakes, can be made by: (1) controlling the small rodents before they migrate; (2) clearing rubbish and brush in adjacent areas; (3) constructing a snake fence around the trouble-stricken area. The latter is made of 36-inch wide, 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth. The lower end bury and if possible cement at least four to six inches into the ground. The upper end tilt outwardly at a 30 degree angle. Openings, such as gates, should be tightly striped with wide canvas belting to prevent snakes from entering underneath or along the sides of the entrances.

If beneficial lizards are deemed undesirable, controlling insect populations will cause them to feed elsewhere.

A knowledge of animal feeding habits again will solve other urban vertebrate pest problems with little effort. Residents complaining of turf being pock-marked and turned during the night are generally contributing unknowingly to the menu of insect feeding urbanized skunks. This problem may be solved by spraying the turf with an insecticide to kill the insect larvae in the soil (Merrill, 1962). The skunks subsequently will feed elsewhere.

Large animals when a nuisance migrating into urban areas, such as racoons and opossums, can be live-trapped and removed away from the fringe of urbanization.

"Urbanized Wildlife" are part of our own environment. Through adaptation their needs are fulfilled by the expansion of man's own territory. Some species are enjoyed and/or tolerated by him, but management of other species to limit their populations at times is necessary. Whenever possible control in urban areas should be through humane methods which are compatible to all life -- the vertebrate pest, man and his domestic animals, and non-target species of vegetation and wildlife.

Information concerning endangered and protected species can be obtained from the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Department of Fish and Game. These or other official agencies concerned with wildlife should be consulted to obtain rules and regulations of specific areas.

LITERATURE CITED

- CUMMINGS, M. 1964. Woodpecker damage. Wildlife Management, No. 4, University of Calif., Davis.
- MERRILL, H. 1962. Control of opossums, bats, raccoons, and skunks. Proceedings: Vertebrate Pest Control Conference, 79-95.