

THE ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT OF BIRD CONTROL

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Economic value is a leading reason for bird protection. It is not the only reason, however, and it is not one that is without exception. Exceptions run all the way from sporadic and trifling misbehavior by otherwise highly useful birds, to habitual and serious depredations on the part of species intrinsically much less beneficial.

In the case of birds that do comparatively little harm, it has always been the practice to overlook it on the principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire. This hire, although a public debt, has been paid as a toll on crops by agriculturists with little or no protest, because it has not amounted to much, and further because the farmer affected often realized that there was a counterbalancing benefit accruing to him personally.

When damage becomes serious, however, especially in restricted areas, and to specialized crops, the agriculturist justifiably feels that some relief should be afforded him, as the good, if any, done by the birds concerned, may not be on his property, and thus in no way offsets his losses.

There are those who urge, nevertheless, that in these days of notorious agricultural over-production, the losses should be taken in a philosophical manner, since a decrease in production is desirable. This point of view, however, ignores the fact that over-production is a public, not an individual, phenomenon. To the individual grower, over-production is theoretical; it may or it may not occur and his only safe course is to proceed according to the latter alternative. Under-production can never be of advantage to the individual. If production could be so regulated that the supply (pest damage disregarded) would just equal the demand, measures to control depredations would then be absolutely necessary, and finding them a matter of vital public concern. Under present unregulated conditions, control of pest damage is of individual concern, and in the absence of an arrangement for public sharing of the losses, vitally necessary.

The individual agriculturist is under the strongest economic compulsion to produce as good a crop as he can both in quality and quantity. Bird damage not only may cut down production, but in the case of fruit crops especially can rapidly lower quality and cause the loss of profits that seemed almost within the farmer's grasp. The fact that birds are generally useful is no comfort and no compensation for the individual sustaining serious losses. What is needed is a sharing mechanism, one that in effect will assess those benefiting by the services of birds in aid of those suffering damage. The only way in which this can be accomplished is by public action, and the question is of what kind?

Legislation protecting birds is formal acknowledgment of public interest in the utility of birds, and most bird laws in some way concede that there is community interest also in the destructiveness of birds. This is indicated in various ways, as by excepting certain species from protection, by providing for special modification of protected status when serious damage is being done, or by a saving statement that nothing in the law shall be construed to forbid defense of crops or other property attacked by protected birds.

These concessions it will be noted throw the burden of defense upon the individual suffering losses. Thus while the public by positive measures protects birds when useful, as a rule it acts only negatively when they are destructive. It would

seem that this situation should be altered, as it is certainly logical that responsibility for damage by protected birds should rest upon the protecting agency.

The most direct way of fulfilling this responsibility is to pay for damage done, and this course has been adopted in some States. For many years Massachusetts and Vermont have been appraising and paying for damage done by deer, and these arrangements with improvements necessitated by experience are still in force. The method requires careful administration, however, to prevent fraud as it is difficult to set up sufficient legislative safeguards to entirely prevent this form of chicanery. The system of direct payment of damages is certainly the one that should receive the support of those who urge absolute or nearly absolute protection for birds or other forms of wild life capable of doing damage. Appraisal and payment of damage requires personnel, correspondence, and field work, however, and for these reasons proposals to adopt the practice usually are not well received.

Another method is for the public to carry on whatever control measures are required, but this is objected to on the same score of increased official expense and personnel. This method, which can be made the most effective and discriminating of any, is strenuously combated also by those opposed to bird control, because of the recognized and permanent status it gives to a procedure abhorrent to them. It is in effect, moreover, a governmental subsidy to the activity concerned, another idea not readily tolerated.

Both of the alternatives thus far mentioned would fail to assist in the case of birds entirely unprotected by law, and naturally these are likely to include the species doing most damage. In a way there is partial public responsibility for depredations of these species, as they undoubtedly benefit by the generally protected status, and public sentiment in favor, of birds, as well as by sharing in the protection afforded by refuges, by trespass and cruelty-to-animals laws, by restrictions upon use of fire-arms, traps, poisons, and so on.

A third arrangement, namely, for individuals to solve their own control problems, often has resulted in the use of too dangerous methods in indiscriminate ways. To be acceptable, control operations by individuals need to be supervised or at least competently instructed, which brings us back again to the practical necessity of public participation in the matter.

If public agencies make investigations as to what is advisable and by experiment perfect methods of control, then pass this information on to the individual sustaining losses, steps would be taken that would combine due public aid and guidance, with conditions that would tend to hold bird control to the minimum. This system would largely restrict control to the cases where it proves economically feasible, that is, where it can be carried on as a part of the regular routine of crop production, figured into the costs, and still allow a margin of profit. If this governing influence could be made a factor in all bird control activities, it would go far toward insuring that they would be carried on only when really needed. This system would be an acknowledgment of public responsibility in the problem, it would offer limited public cooperation, and would turn bird control activities over to the individuals most concerned in a way that would tend to prevent abuse.

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