



Controlling Nuisance Birds in New Mexico

Guide L-212

Jon Boren and Brian J. Hurd
Extension Wildlife Specialist and Extension Research Specialist

Cooperative Extension Service • College of Agriculture and Home Economics



This publication is scheduled to be updated and reissued 3/08.

INTRODUCTION

House sparrows, starlings and pigeons can cause problems for people in urban and suburban areas of New Mexico. Although all three species are common throughout the state, none are native to New Mexico.

There are a variety of health concerns and damage issues associated with house sparrows, starlings and pigeons. They can transmit diseases to humans and are host to a variety of parasites and insect pests. For example, *Salmonella* is found in about 2 percent of pigeon feces and accounts for frequent cases of food poisoning in humans. Pigeon nests also can create fire hazards and clog drainpipes. Droppings can deface and ruin property as well. In addition, starlings compete for nesting sites with native cavity-nesting birds, such as bluebirds, flickers and woodpeckers.

IDENTIFICATION

House sparrow

The English or house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) is a brown, chunky bird about 5 3/4 inches long (fig. 1). The male has a distinctive black throat, white cheeks, a gray crown and chestnut-colored feathers on the upper wings. The female and young have plain, dingy-gray breasts, distinct, buffy eye stripes and streaked backs.

The house sparrow, introduced from Europe, has spread across the United States and is found almost everywhere in New Mexico. It is an aggressive, adaptable bird that nests in or around manmade structures, such as building vents and window ledges, as well as in trees.

Although house sparrows primarily are grain eaters, sparrows in urban areas have adapted to feed at garbage cans, backyard bird feeders and home gardens.



Figure 1. English or house sparrow.



Figure 2. European starling.

Starling

European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are about the same size as a robin and have short, square tails. They generally are chunky and hump-backed in appearance. The wings have a triangular shape when outstretched in flight. Adults are iridescent black with light speckles on the feathers (fig. 2). The bill of both sexes is yellow during the reproductive cycle (January to June) and dark at other times.

The starling was introduced to New York from Europe in the late 1800s and now occupies the entire country. It is an aggressive, adaptable bird, common in urban and suburban areas. It nests in any suitable hole or cavity in birdhouses, buildings and trees.

Starlings eat a variety of foods, but prefer seeds and fruits. They also feed on insects during the spring and summer when insects are numerous.



Figure 3. Pigeon.

Pigeon

The pigeon or rock dove (*Columba livia*) typically has a bluish gray body and wings, a dark head, a whitish rump, two dark wing bars, a broad black band on the tail and red feet (fig. 3). Body color can vary from gray to white, tan and black. It weighs approximately 13 ounces and is about 11 inches long.

The pigeon was introduced from the Old World and is now found throughout the United States. In fact, pigeons are very common in many urban and suburban areas of New Mexico. Pigeons are highly dependent on humans for food and roosting, loafing and nesting sites. They are found commonly around farms, grain elevators, feed mills, parks, city buildings, bridges and other structures.

Pigeons are primarily grain and seed eaters. However, they also feed on garbage, insects and food materials provided by people.

DAMAGE PREVENTION AND CONTROL METHODS

Controlling of nuisance birds can be both difficult and frustrating. The most effective way to control problem birds is to remove or exclude their daily requirements. A variety of methods will be discussed to help homeowners control nuisance birds and prevent bird damage. Remember, it often is necessary to use a variety of methods simultaneously to control nuisance birds, because birds easily become accustomed to single control practices.

Habitat Modification

In some cases, homeowners may reduce the number of nuisance birds by choosing plants that do not produce edible nuts, fruits and berries. However, in many cases this may not be practical. Trimming and pruning trees and shrubs also may decrease the amount of available nesting and roosting habitat. Thinning roosting trees

and shrubs often does not need to be dramatic in order to be effective.

Changing the type of food offered in bird feeders can reduce the number of undesirable birds. For example, house sparrows often are a problem at birdfeeders. To reduce their numbers, feed them straight sunflower seeds (preferably the black, oil-type) instead of a seed mixture. Using tubular feeders without perches also makes it more difficult for house sparrows and other large birds to feed. In some cases, homeowners may need to discontinue feeding altogether in the spring, summer and early fall.

Water sources also attract birds, particularly starlings. Therefore, where starlings are a problem, removing unnecessary water may be effective.

Exclusion

Pigeons, starlings and house sparrows can be excluded from entering buildings and other structures by blocking access to indoor roosts and nesting areas. Close all openings greater than 3/4 inch to exclude house sparrows and 1 inch to exclude starlings. Openings to lofts, steeples, vents and eaves should be blocked with plywood, sheet metal, masonry, 1/4-inch wire mesh or plastic or nylon netting.

Hanging clear plastic strips from barn and shed doorways also will prevent most birds from entering the structure, while still allowing people, machinery and livestock to pass through.

Various methods are available to prevent birds from nesting or roosting on ledges, rafters, under eaves and other overhangs.

- Nylon or plastic netting can be attached to the underside of rafters or overhangs to keep birds out. Netting also is useful for covering fruit crops, such as grapes, to prevent birds from roosting or eating the fruit (fig. 4).

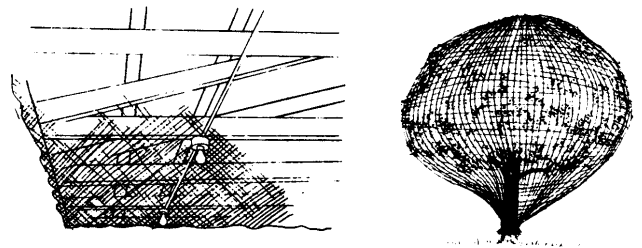


Figure 4. Netting used to keep birds out of rafters and trees (Lee and Henderson, 1992).

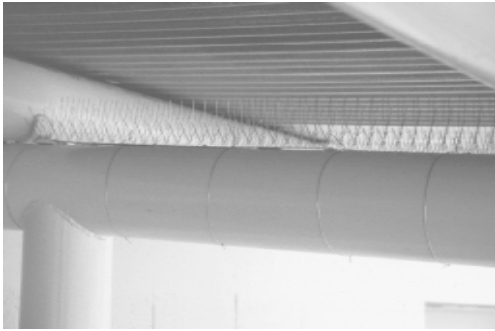


Figure 5. Nixalite used to prevent pigeons from roosting on steel beams.

- “Porcupine wires” (Cat Claw, Nixalite) can be used to prevent birds from nesting or roosting on ledges or rafters (fig. 5). These wires are made of many steel prongs with sharp points extending outward at all angles. The sharp points deter birds from landing on the surfaces they are applied to. In some cases, nesting material, such as twigs and grass, must be removed from the “porcupine wires” in order to maintain their effectiveness.

Frightening Devices

Frightening devices include alarm and distress calls, exploding shells, automatic gas exploders, tethered balloons with big eyes painted on them, hawk silhouettes, water sprayers, aluminum pie plates and flashing lights. In some cases, these devices repel starlings and other birds, such as crows and blackbirds, from roosts and small-scale fruit crops. However, frightening devices have little or no effect on house sparrows and pigeons. Simultaneous use of visual scare devices and noisemakers seems to be most effective. However, both visual and sound devices must be moved frequently or the birds will become accustomed to them. In addition, it often takes five to seven nights or more of continuous effort for frightening programs to be effective.

Repellents

Soft, sticky repellents, such as Bird Tanglefoot and 4-The-Birds, consist of nontoxic materials that can be used to discourage birds from roosting on areas, such as ledges and roof beams. It is helpful to first put masking tape on the surface that needs protection, and then apply the repellent onto the tape. This increases the effectiveness of the sticky repellents on porous surfaces and makes for easier removal. However, these repellents are messy, collect dirt and need to be reapplied several times a year.

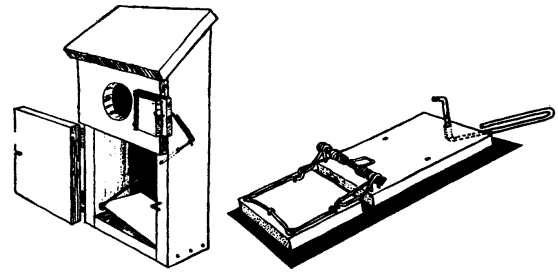


Figure 6. Nest-box trap with modified mouse snap trap trigger used for trapping pigeons, house sparrows or starlings (Lee and Henderson, 1992).

Trapping

Live trapping is another good alternative for controlling nuisance birds. Live trapping methods include funnel traps, automatic and triggered traps, nest-box traps (fig. 6), decoy traps and mist nests. With these methods, protected songbirds can be released unharmed.

When using live traps, prebait the area without a trap, or around the outside of the unset trap, for one to two weeks. Common baits include cracked corn or milo. Then set the trap with the same bait inside. Be sure to check the traps several times each day, so nontarget birds can be released unharmed and the number of birds that might find a way to escape is reduced.

Be sure to terminate house sparrows, starlings or pigeons caught in the trap in a humane manner. Releasing the birds back to the “wild” often is impractical. For example, pigeons are likely to return even when released 50 miles or more from the problem site, and they can become problems in other communities. Because some cities and towns require special permits, also check with local animal control or wildlife conservation officers for trapping regulations.

OTHER CONTROL METHODS

Where local ordinances permit, some success for controlling pigeons and house sparrows can be achieved with persistent shooting. For example, shooting can be an effective technique to remove a few pigeons around farms or grain elevators. However, for starlings, shooting is more effective as a dispersal technique than as a way to reduce numbers.

Removing nests at two-week intervals during the spring and summer can sometimes help reduce pigeon and house sparrow populations. A long pole with a hook attached to the end is an effective tool for reaching nests under rafters or eaves. Be persistent because the birds will keep trying to reestablish their nests in the

same location. The nests also should be collected and removed to eliminate nesting material for rebuilding. This technique should be used in conjunction with other control methods.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of the information for this publication was adapted from:

- Fitzwater, W. D. 1994. *House sparrows*. Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage, Great Plains Agricultural Council, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb.
- Johnson, R. J., and J. F. Glahn. 1994. *European starlings*. Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage, Great Plains Agricultural Council, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb.
- Lee, C., and F. R. Henderson. 1992. *Birds, Urban Wildlife Damage Control*. Kansas State University, Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, Kan., L-856.
- Texas Wildlife Damage Management Service. 1998. *Wildlife Damage Management: Controlling Roosting Birds in Urban Areas*. Texas Wildlife Damage Management Service, San Antonio, Texas, L-1921.
- Texas Wildlife Damage Management Service. 1998. *Wildlife Damage Management: Controlling House Sparrows*. Texas Wildlife Damage Management Service, San Antonio, Texas, L-1920.
- Williams, D. E., and R. M. Corrigan. 1994. *Pigeons (rock doves)*. Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage, Great Plains Agricultural Council, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Neb.

The information given herein is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement is implied by NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service.