

COMBATING THE GROWING URBAN BIRD MENACE



Birds are causing growing headaches in and around public and private sector buildings and spaces across the UK. As well as complaints, building damage and public safety risks, they are adding substantially to cleaning and maintenance costs. Yet these problems can easily be eliminated by simple and relatively inexpensive deterrent measures.

This is the experience of international bird management expert, Grahame Turner who heads-up a series of specialist Network training courses helping the industry cope with the challenge of urban birds.

“Urban seagull populations have increased markedly in recent years, adding to the already significant problem of pigeons, together with starlings and house sparrows,” he explains.

“At the same time, avian flu has made the public very much more aware of the health risks posed by birds. Growing street feeding of birds and increasing litter in many areas has increased bird nuisance – both real and perceived. And budgetary pressures are placing increasing restrictions on building cleaning and maintenance schedules.

“Because birds, their feathers and droppings harbour a range of diseases, allergens, insects and mites harmful to humans, legislation makes it an offence to allow birds into food preparation or storage areas. In most areas, though, image, cost and safety are probably the most important issues facing facilities managers.

“Bird fouling looks and smells unpleasant, and frequently puts off people from using areas in the vicinity of nesting and perching sites. Droppings further present a serious slip hazard on pavements and walkways; and one that rapidly builds up to troublesome levels again after clearance.

“Significant also is the extent to which acid bird droppings damage stone and metalwork, and the accumulation of nesting materials and droppings causes water damage by blocking gutters and downspouts. This can be very costly in many cases.”

Traditionally, pest birds were controlled by shooting or baiting. Increasingly vocal public concerns over culling, along with changing legislation, mean this is no longer necessarily appropriate. However, Mr Turner points out that much of the challenge posed by birds can be tackled by strategic building proofing.

“This definitely demands more planning and a better understanding of the behaviour of the birds to be controlled,” he accepts. “But it need not be more difficult or costly. Indeed, effective bird proofing of key structures can often show major direct cost savings as well as valuable environmental and public safety improvements.



“For instance, proofing the roof of a block of flats from pigeons cut annual cleaning costs by £3600 and made the flats altogether safer and more pleasant to live in. And preventing starlings from roosting in one city hall overcame a long-term problem that had previously contributed to a £50,000 stonework repair bill and the building's restricted public use.”

Apart from its humaneness, the big advantage of overcoming bird problems by physically protecting buildings and structures from perching and roosting is that it can provide a long-term solution. The disadvantage, though, is that the birds are still there and will seek to overcome the protection or be displaced to other areas.

Under these circumstances, Grahame Turner insists that the secret of cost-effective control over the longest possible lifetime is good planning, the right choice of protection for the specific task, and the best quality of materials and installation.

“There are a host of spike, netting and wiring systems available these days,” he notes. “But you need to choose the best combination of proofing to tackle the particular problem you have; make sure the components are robust enough to stand the test of time; and install the equipment so it cannot be subverted.

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“To do the job effectively spikes need to be the correct size for the bird species involved; an appropriate design (angle, density and rigidity of the wires) for the level of infestation; orientated and placed correctly; and attached sufficiently strongly. Furthermore, they should be metal rather than plastic if they are to work well, last well and not spoil the visual appearance of the building.

“As well as being of the correct mesh size for the task in hand, nets need to be accurately and firmly attached both to avoid leaving bird access routes and to minimise visual impact – a task that is particularly challenging with awkwardly-shaped structures. Correct selection and spacing of fixings, angling and tensioning of nets, and stand-offs from structures are equally vital to avoid mesh damage.”

The key thing Grahame Turner insists needs to be appreciated is that birds use different areas of a building for different purposes and their motivation to regain some proofed areas will be much stronger than others.

This means the most robust protection is required around potential nesting sites and areas used for overnight roosting. Also needing particular attention are areas habitually used in the daytime because they overlook good food sources or are regularly used for sunbathing. In contrast, generally higher-up and less frequented areas need less protection.

“Bird proofing simply must be undertaken on the basis of careful surveys to identify which birds are using which areas for which purposes,” he advises. “You should also appreciate that proofing one area will only displace birds to an alternative site in the immediate vicinity if this not also protected.

“While poorly made or installed bird proofing can be more trouble than it’s worth, facilities managers have found good quality protection invaluable in combating the growing challenge of birds in a huge variety of situations. Professional bird work undertaken on contract for local businesses is also proving an excellent source of revenue for some organisations.”

