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## Fowl Play: The Dangers of Birds and Their Droppings

By **Mona Zemsky and Mark Brouwer**  
01/14/2008

A memorable scene from the movie *Fight Club* depicts the ultimate act of anarchy for car owners. During the scene, Edward Norton and Brad Pitt feed pigeons a "formula" that results in devastating amounts of bird mess on every BMW, Ferrari and Volkswagen on the block. If you are an urban driver or business owner, dealing with birds is more than class warfare; it's a nasty invasion.

Pigeons and other bird pests perch in rafters, under bridges, around rail lines, in parking garages, airport hangars, loading docks and warehouses. They also find their way to lube shops; auto detail, wash and repair facilities; dealership buildings and more.

Their droppings can carry diseases, erode steel and instantly devalue vehicles, rooftops and capital assets. If your workplace has a consistent level of bird droppings, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommend you post warning signs due to the danger of airborne diseases.

Not to worry. If your place of business seems like a neighborhood pub for the local pigeon population, there are many options available for fighting back. The key is to find a sustainable, humane and permanent solution to keep birds away and your facility (and customers' cars) clean.

### More than a Nuisance

Bird droppings are no joke. As buildings and structures age, maintenance becomes increasingly important, and buildings are at risk for structural degradation from birds' uric acid excrement. Bird droppings, salt, weather and stop-and-go traffic can work together to weaken metal, concrete and other materials. As a result, compromised structures can fail, sometimes with devastating results, as witnessed last year with the tragic bridge collapse in Minneapolis.

Inspectors identified pigeon dung as one of the contributing factors to the erosion of the bridge. An ABC News headline even exclaimed, "Pigeon poop took toll on failed Minneapolis freeway span."

Think about what would constitute a similar "disaster" in your line of work. If droppings pile up on the HVAC system, they can cause the ventilation system to suck in dried fecal matter, potentially affecting (and infecting) employees and visitors. Employees also can get sick from droppings or slip, resulting in lost man hours or occupational lawsuits.

There also may be a risk of alienating customers who may choose to avoid your business due to perceived filth. Not only are droppings unsightly and unappealing, they also may imply the prevalence of low-quality conditions in your workplace. A messy scene can negatively impact your well-being, morale and productivity. Certainly you would rather have employees do something more productive than clean up after invasive bird species. If you are in this situation, droppings may be costing you time and money.

Structurally, roof repairs can become necessary much sooner and cost much more than normal degradation due to damage. Birds are destructive. Their droppings deface rooftops, walls and equipment, as well as vehicles. The corrosive effect of the excrement causes irreversible damage and shortens the life of vital structures.

### Unhealthy Environment

Did you know birds and their droppings can carry more than 60 diseases that can invade and infect humans? You more than likely have heard of salmonella and bed bugs, but add to this list tongue-twisters such as histoplasmosis and cryptosporidiosis. Keep in mind that some bird-carried diseases can be fatal. (Please see the sidebar for details.)

In short, birds can jeopardize your physical and financial health. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reports that histoplasmosis is a fungus-caused disease that can attack the lungs and other organs. If left untreated, it can be fatal. Anyone working at a job or close to places where the fungus is in the air can get this disease if enough of it is inhaled.

"The CDC, in a publication dealing with protecting workers at risk to histoplasmosis, says health-risk warning signs should be posted in areas that may be contaminated with histoplasmosis, such as those with accumulations of bird manure," reports the *Times-Tribune* in Scranton, Pa.

Some jobs and hobbies that increase the risk for exposure include bridge inspectors, painters, construction workers, demolition workers, gardeners, heating and air-conditioning system installers, pest control workers and restorers of

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historic or abandoned buildings, according to the HHS.

#### Where to Look

Birds can be a nuisance almost anywhere, but there are several prime targets. You should pay particular attention to rooftops, ledges, sills, poles and signs. Birds often land in these spots first to survey the scene, watch for predators, seek shelter and hunt for food.

Semi-enclosed areas, such as showrooms, car-care centers and truck bays, also are prime real estate for birds. These areas provide shelter from the elements and a good home base for birds to raise their young. These offspring, in all likelihood, will return year after year to compound the problem.

Also keep an eye on eaves, canopies and awnings. These protected areas are ideal for birds. If your business is in a popular pedestrian area or you have outdoor seating and food service as part of your services, there is a good chance for food spillage and garbage. Birds often know exactly when and where to arrive. Mixing food and live animals is never a good idea.

#### Fighting Back

So what choices do you have to fight back?

Although lethal methods for bird removal are popular, our experience with customers indicates that this type of solution tends to treat only the symptoms, not the problem itself. Poison, for example, does nothing to make the area undesirable to the birds. New birds will continue to come if there is a reason they like it there.

It makes better sense to treat the problem once and for all, not perpetually. However, in using non-lethal methods to confront customer bird problems, we also have learned that birds are stubborn. They want to stay!

Nevertheless, it is possible to use that stubbornness against them. Birds are creatures of habit. Whether using sound, lasers or another repelling method, it is best if there is motion or change involved. Birds get used to deterrents that just sit there or make the same noise every time.

Bird-X Inc., for example, makes acclimation virtually impossible by creating built-in change or motion in all of its products. The company's sound products vary in frequency, duration and sequence, which help keep the birds from ignoring the sounds and compel them to find a new home. In addition, our visual repellents have moving eyes that follow the birds everywhere or wings that actually flap in the wind. This seems to be a key factor in long-term discouragement.

Within these types of choices are sonic or ultrasonic sound generators, visual scare devices, odor and taste aversions, and physical roost inhibitors, including spiked needle strips, sticky gels or bird netting. All of these are low maintenance, and none harm the birds — an important factor in any company's community relations.

Timing is key. Install your solution as early as possible, preferably before "bird season" begins in the spring. It is easier to keep birds away than route them once they have established a living pattern.

If they have already arrived, don't wait. We recommend that you install a solution right away because it is still easier to deal with the problem now, rather than wait until next year when they have been on-site even longer. If this is your situation, you may need a more aggressive plan.

You also may want to consider using two or more different solutions together. This aggressive stance more than doubles a solution's effectiveness. The idea is to keep the environment changing to keep the birds from settling.

Once a solution is in place, make a note to move visual devices or change settings on machines occasionally, just to keep the birds off balance and banished. In addition, make sure all nets and spikes remain in place. A good time to check is late winter, just before the spring bird season starts. This gives you plenty of time to take action if necessary.

Pigeons and cars have feuded as long as there have been pigeons and cars. *Fight Club* notwithstanding, it is possible for the cars to win.

*Mona Zemsky and Mark Brouwer are technical consultants with Bird-X Inc. Please call 800.662.5021 or visit [www.bird-x.com/MCC](http://www.bird-x.com/MCC) for answers to technical questions or a free consultation on a specific bird situation.*

### Diseases Associated with Birds

More than 60 transmissible diseases, some fatal, are associated with pigeons, starlings and house sparrows and their droppings. Some examples include:

- **Histoplasmosis** is a potentially fatal respiratory disease resulting from a fungus growing in dried droppings.
- **Cryptococcosis** is caused by yeast found in the intestinal tract of pigeons and starlings. The illness often begins as a pulmonary disease and may later affect the central nervous system. The fungus is most apt to be found in roosting and nesting sites, such as attics, cupolas, ledges, schools, offices, warehouses, mills, barns, park buildings and signs.
- **Salmonellosis** often occurs as "food poisoning" and can be traced to pigeons, starlings and sparrows. Dust from bird droppings can be sucked through ventilators and air conditioners, contaminating food and cooking surfaces.

Besides being direct carriers of disease, nuisance birds are frequently associated with more than 50 kinds of ectoparasites, which can infest structures and bite humans. About two-thirds of these pests may be detrimental to the general health and well-being of humans and domestic animals. The rest are considered nuisance or incidental pests. A few examples of ectoparasites include:

- **Bed bugs** may consume up to five times their own weight in blood drawn from hosts, which include humans and some domestic animals. In extreme conditions, victims may become weak and anemic. Pigeons,



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starlings and house sparrows are known to carry bed bugs.

- **Chicken mites** are known carriers of encephalitis and may also cause fowl mite dermatitis and acariasis. While they subsist on blood drawn from a variety of birds, they may also attack humans. They have been found on pigeons, starlings and house sparrows.
- **Mosquitoes** transmit the West Nile virus to humans through the infected blood of birds they have bitten.

Source: Bird-X Inc.

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