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PRODUCT REPORT

For the Birds

Pest birds can be controlled with a wide variety of humane and effective methods.

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By Nicole V. Gagné

In the summer of 2007, a lake favored for swimming in upstate New York had to be closed to the public because of a massive E. coli contamination of the water. Was the culprit a sewer-main break, cesspool leak or renegade sewage disposal? No. It was birds – the lake had been polluted by the droppings of migrating geese.

That incident represents just a minor woe in the endless litany of problems we encounter with birds. There are some 60 known diseases, transmittable to humans, which are found either on birds or in their nests and droppings. Some of the most ubiquitous – pigeons, starlings and sparrows – are regular germ factories, carrying an array of diseases, including bacterial (including streptococcosis and tuberculosis), mycotic (including cryptococcosis and histoplasmosis), protozoal (including toxoplasmosis), and viral (including encephalitis and meningitis). And there are parasitic cestodes, nematodes, and trematodes too.

Anyone who cleans out an attic where birds have roosted must, at the very least, wear protective gloves, eye protection and a respiratory mask, because these diseases are most frequently contracted by humans who've inhaled the dust of dried and powdery droppings; the job also requires using a bactericide and a surface disinfectant, along with a surface deodorizer (so the previous birds' scent won't attract more birds).

The other significant problem caused by birds is of course property damage, as their highly corrosive droppings eat away at virtually all building materials – wood, stone, metal and masonry – and discolor paint, short-out electrical equipment and clog gutters.

What is needed is some way to render undesirable the location to which birds are attracted. This survey examines three different companies that specialize in humanely controlling birds: Nixalite of America, Inc., of East Moline, IL; Bird-X Inc., of Chicago, IL; and Avian Flyaway, Inc. (AFI), of Rockwall, TX.

"I'm third generation. Our company was started by my grandfather Charles Kaufmann in 1950," says Cory Gellerstedt, co-president of Nixalite. "He invented the very first bird spikes ever made. He passed away in 1957 and my mother took over. I've been in and out of the business since I was a kid, and went fulltime in 1988."

The spikes he is referring to are Nixalite's strongest seller, a stainless-steel wire-and-strip arrangement of bristling needle-like spikes upon which birds cannot land. They are available in several configurations, depending on the width of the space and the way in which they are to be used, and although intimidating, are perfectly safe. "The United States Humane Society has not only endorsed it, but they've also used our products," says Gellerstedt. "We have never had any problems with birds getting stuck or impaled. They come down and try to get a footing, and when they can't, they just fly away and find someplace else."

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Although the narrow wire points are fine enough to be barely noticeable once installed, Nixalite offers its models in eight standard colors plus a custom-color line, enhancing their ability to blend in with their surroundings. There are also economy lines available, combining either stainless-steel wires and a flexible UV-stabilized plastic base or all-plastic wires and base.

Other physical-barrier products from Nixalite include nets and mesh barriers and the Flite-Line Bird Wire, with spring-tensioned stainless-steel wire run between stainless-steel posts to deter large birds from landing or roosting.

The firm also offers various chemical repellents and fear devices for protecting crops and spaces such as golf courses, lawns, parks and cemeteries. Fog Force is a bird-dispersal agent designed specifically for fog application; Migrate Goose Repellent makes grass and turf unpalatable to geese and other grazing birds; Ropel, another taste repellent, is used for woodpeckers; Crop Guardian, sprayed on cherry, grape, and blueberry crops, reduces feeding losses from pest birds. All are biodegradable, non-toxic, and safe for humans and pets.

Nixalite also offers Tanglefoot, a sticky compound that's non-drying, non-toxic, colorless and odorless that birds dislike stepping into. Like other chemical methods, Tanglefoot requires regular re-application. "After about a year the paste will have caught dust and debris and bugs and leaves, and it can discolor too," says Gellerstedt. "We always recommend, where possible, to put down duct tape on the surface first and then apply the Tanglefoot, so when clean up comes around, you can simply pull the tape up to remove everything, throw it away, and start over again."

Fright devices from Nixalite display a range of ingenuity. Bird Scare Predator Eye is a balloon adorned with owl eyes. "We did not come up with the balloons," says Gellerstedt, "but we've sold them for many years. They're strictly temporary measures – birds will get used to them. But the eyes work better than the plastic owls that some people sell, because they move in the wind. It also helps if you change the color of the balloons and move them around frequently; it makes it more effective. But eventually, especially with severe problems, the birds will get used to them and just ignore them. The same type of situation holds for the Repeller Ribbon." Repeller Ribbon is a holographic tape, cut into long strips and hung from trees, which produces a discomfort zone for birds, from both the light it reflects and its metallic rattling sound.

No bird, however, can get used to Nixalite's new Scarecrow Motion-Activated Sprinkler, thanks to its battery-operated motion/heat sensor that releases a short pulsating stream of water to frighten away birds. "Those work great for smaller garden areas," says Gellerstedt. "A lot of people put them over hot tubs or pool areas, where birds can land and make a mess."

Bird-X established itself as the premiere source for ultrasonic bird repellers back in 1964. Mona Zemsky, the firm's marketing manager, has been with Bird-X since 1991. "We've been functioning in this niche of humane bird control for over 43 years," she says. "We're often referred by government agencies and USDA and humane societies as a good choice for getting rid of birds without harming them – or harming people or the environment."

The ultrasonic repellers originally had a different purpose. "They were being sold to warehouses for access control in a security-alarm system," says Zemsky. "Then some customers began calling, saying 'I've had pigeons in my warehouse for decades, and suddenly they're not here anymore. What is this thing you sold me?' That was the genesis of Bird-X. The ultrasonic frequency is at a range above human hearing, but it's still not recommended for use, say, where people are working a shift at their station. Normally these units are used up at the level of the birds – the rafters of a building, near the roof."

One of Bird-X's innovations has been ultrasonic deterrents for exterior use. "It used to be that ultrasonic sound didn't travel very far and had to be used with the benefit of an enclosure, so that you got some reverberation," says Zemsky. "But people were clamoring to use it on balconies and patios, for a restaurant or hotel's outdoor eating area, for gas stations and on billboards. We have over 30 products that we work with, and the UltrasonX was developed for exteriors. I'm not going to argue that it would be great for an airfield or the roof of a huge government building, but in semi-small, semi-defined areas where you don't expect the ultrasonic sound to travel all that much anyway, it's a great option." Bird-X also offers a line of sound repellers that scare birds with prerecorded distress calls and predator calls.

For maximum effectiveness, Bird-X encourages buyers to combine ultrasonic and sonic devices with visual deterrents. "Terror-Eyes is a big orange ball with holograms for eyes, and there is no chance that any bird has seen anything in nature like this," says Zemsky. "Other people prefer something more natural looking, like our Prowler Owl." The Prowler Owl is moved by the wind in a "hunting posture" and has a windsock body, plastic owl head, and Tyvek patented flapping wings that span 44 in. There's also Bird-Lite, a stroboscopic bird repeller that emits white, red, and blue light flashes 75 times per minute, and the holographic Irri-Tape.

Along with sound repellers and visual deterrents, Bird-X also offers physical roost inhibitors and chemical taste aversions. The former includes net barriers and the firm's "SPIKES" line of roosting inhibitors in various configurations, with polycarbonate base and stainless-steel spikes, or polycarbonate base and spikes; other products include Bird-Proof Gel or Liquid, non-toxic, sticky chemicals that makes a surface tacky and uncomfortable for birds.

Biodegradable, non-toxic taste-aversion chemicals include BirdShield, which is sprayed on crops; Goose Chase, which is sprayed on turf and lawns; and FruitShield, which is sprayed on fruit and foliage. "The chemical repellents are really the newest thing on the horizon," Zemsky points out, "and we're really excited about them, because some people reject all the other options and don't want anything that can be seen or heard. That's where the taste aversions work great. They use methyl anthranilate, the same flavoring compound in grape-flavored bubble gum and candy. But if you spray it on the grass, geese and ducks don't want to eat it; if you spray it on a building, its odor repels the birds. Of course, they'll need to be re-applied, so it becomes a matter of how you want to tackle the problem. It can last up to 14 days on grass and up to a month on roofs or siding."

Avian Flyaway deals with three basic types of pest birds: nesting birds, primarily pigeons; soaring birds, such as gulls and hawks; and migratory birds, such as starlings and grackles. The firm has been in operation since 1989 and Sheridan Jones, the corporate office regional manager, has been an employee since 1995.

"All of the services that our company provides are non-lethal," she says. "We consider ourselves a 'green' company and are proud of that. In fact, Audubon societies confer with us and agree with what we do. Also, we are a turnkey operation, where we actually do the installations ourselves. In that way, we can definitely confirm that everything is going to be installed correctly and will not harm the birds."

AFI's unique hands-on approach is essential, considering that its Avian Averting System relocates nesting birds by giving them a slight electric shock that's startling but harmless. "In the 12 years that I've been with the company, I've never had any complaints or heard of any instance of the Avian Averting System harming anyone," says Jones. "We install it in areas that are inaccessible to people, such as a building rooftop. But even if someone did touch it, they would feel only a mild shock – enough to get your attention, but not enough to harm anyone." The system is virtually invisible, using clear polycarbonate insulators or AFI's new moldable barrier strip.

This method of relocating nesting birds represents some 75 percent of AFI's business, according to Jones. "The migratory-bird control is another 20 percent and we do only a small amount, maybe 5 percent, in relocating soaring birds with our Grid Systems," she says. AFI's migratory-bird control relies upon visual and sonic deterrents but eschews chemical repellents. "It's sold as a service that we provide," says Jones. "We actually go onto properties and administer startle techniques – and these are proprietary techniques – to displace the birds from roosting in trees. Most of our contracts are annual but some are seasonal because the birds migrate and flock in mass quantities mostly during the migratory time of year – it depends on the species. Our Avian Averting and Grid Systems are designed to last years. They are one-time installations and we can guarantee those installations."

To relocate soaring birds, AFI installs a system of carefully strung wires in overlapping grids. "It distorts their field of vision," says Jones. "When they see the wires, they're not sure if they can get in there or if they can get out again without clipping their wings, and they decide they don't want to enter." Jones reminds us that all of AFI's techniques – like those of Nixalite and Bird-X – are always based on the safety of the birds. "A lot more people are going towards the humane methods these days," she says. "In the past, there have been chemicals used to poison birds – never in our business, but in others – and I know that's gone pretty much by the wayside." **TB**

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