

# Blackbirds in Roosts

## Urban Wildlife Damage Control

**B**lackbirds and starlings often establish roosts in areas where they are unwelcome because of the economic damage and potential health problems they cause. Grackles, brown-headed cowbirds, red-winged blackbirds and starlings form large roosts which create a nuisance in urban areas.

### Laws and Regulations

Federal and state regulations protect blackbirds and other migratory birds. A federal permit is required to take, possess or transport migratory birds for depredation control purposes. But no permit is required to scare or herd these birds, except federally listed threatened or endangered species, bald or golden eagles (50 CFR 21.41).

A standing order exists for blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles, crows and magpies. No federal permit is required and control measures—including lethal methods—may be taken when these species are found “committing or about to commit depredation,” or when they “constitute a health hazard or other nuisance.”

A state permit is required for lethal control of nuisance birds, except feral pigeons, English sparrows or starlings, with poisons or chemicals (KAR 115-16-3). Contact the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks regional offices for this permit or more information on rules and regulations.

### Managing Urban Blackbirds

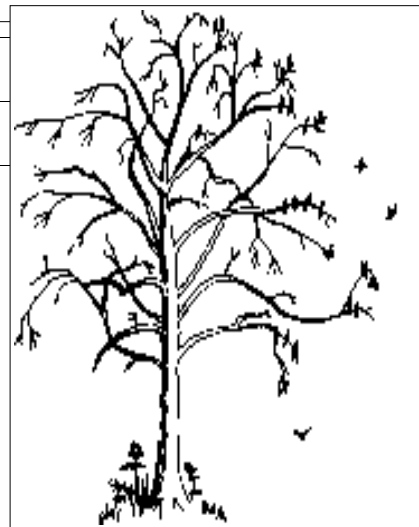
#### Summer and fall roosts

After nesting, blackbirds and starlings begin forming flocks and roosts. Roosts are sometimes formed by late June, but most are established in July. Because flocks prefer deciduous trees, the prevalence of deciduous shade trees in urban and suburban areas makes these sites attractive. Thousands of blackbirds may occupy several blocks of suitable trees in summer roosts. Birds abandon deciduous tree roosts when the leaves drop in the fall.

Community organization is necessary when using scaring devices to disperse summer roosts in urban or suburban neighborhoods. If a summer roost has formed in the same neighborhood for several years, make plans in the spring or early summer before the birds arrive, because they are more easily dispersed before becoming accustomed to a site. Here are the steps to take:

1. Consult neighbors to see if they agree on the problem.
2. Contact local authorities such as the city manager, police department, health department or others for assistance and follow-up.
3. Obtain necessary equipment: a portable tape player and tapes of blackbird distress calls, pistol launchers with whistle bombs (*Figure 1, page 2*).
4. Organize public employees or other responsible adults to help. Usually, three or more persons are needed, depending on roost size.
5. Schedule activities for at least three and possibly five or more consecutive evenings.
6. Begin dispersal activities about one-half hour before dark, or as soon as the birds begin settling into the roost; continue until dark.

When the birds first arrive, they may perch in nearby trees and fly around without settling. This activity is referred to as staging and may go on for 15 to 30 minutes before the birds actually roost. When the birds appear to be roosting, begin playing distress calls,



loudly and intermittently at first, and then continuously as most of the birds are entering. The player and distress calls should be moved to various locations within the roost every few minutes. Shooters should use pistol launchers to fire over the tops of the roost trees. Whistle bombs fired into the incoming flocks will help turn them back. Continue using distress calls and scaring devices as long as birds are entering the roost. After dark, cease activity because birds remaining will not leave, and efforts are useless.

Be persistent and follow-up on successive evenings. In large roosts or where roosts are well established, the first evening may appear to be unsuccessful. Scaring may have to be continued for 4 or 5 days before the birds abandon the area. With small roosts or where birds are less established, scaring may disperse flocks the first night but should be continued for several more to prevent them from returning.

Where dispersed flocks go is unpredictable. They may join flights of birds going to other roosts or may set up a new one. Once birds have been moved,

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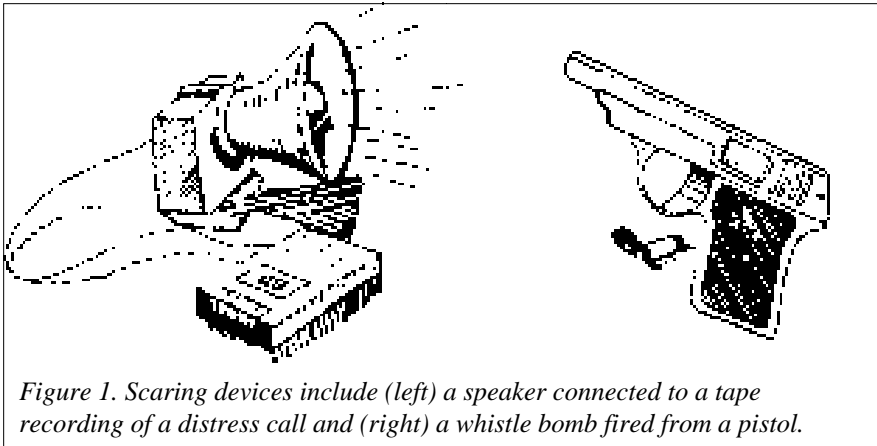


Figure 1. Scaring devices include (left) a speaker connected to a tape recording of a distress call and (right) a whistle bomb fired from a pistol.

they are usually more responsive to dispersal from another site.

Removing vegetation can be effective in controlling roost populations. It is not always possible or desirable to remove all cover, but thinning helps. Wherever possible, remove all understory shrubs and brush and as many canopy trees as you can. The goal should be not to have any interlocking canopy tree branches. **Note:** Do not alter habitats in roosts that have been active for more than a year without contacting state health officials.

**Winter conifer roosts**

Many blackbirds migrate south, but some sizable flocks of grackles, cowbirds and starlings remain in Kansas during the winter, especially in the southern counties. After leaf fall, flocks assemble in conifer plantations to take

advantage of the protective cover of the closely spaced trees. Roosts are formed in late fall and may persist until March of the following year.

Generally, winter roosts are in the countryside where they do not create the problems associated with summer urban roosts, even though the number of birds may be higher, and they may cover a larger area. Although the same methods and materials can be used, eliminating winter roosts requires more work and equipment, including automatic exploders and 12-gauge shotguns with shellcrackers with greater range than those needed for urban roosts.

Thinning conifer roosts may open stands sufficiently to make them unattractive to birds. Consider timber harvest when winter roosts cannot be managed by bird dispersal.

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**Winter roosts on structures**

Starlings remaining in urban areas during the winter may roost overnight on building ledges, window sills and other places where their noise may be objectionable and their droppings may deface buildings. They forage on streets, vacant lots and around trash receptacles where food waste is carelessly scattered. Starlings also feed at urban and suburban bird feeders.

Sanitation and avoiding structural designs that encourage roosting are basic community considerations. Toxic controls in urban locations are inappropriate, but tactile repellents applied in ribbons or strips are effective on ledges, window sills and other building parts. Birds find these sticky compounds disagreeable underfoot and seek alternative roosting sites. Mechanical devices with projecting wires can be installed to discourage birds from landing and perching.

Distress calls and scaring devices are seldom successful in dispersing starling flocks from structures.

For supply sources, references or educational assistance contact: Animal Damage Control, Room 128 Call Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kan. 66506-1600, (913) 532-5654.

Also, watch for the publication, *Sources of Wildlife Damage Control Supplies*, Rural and Urban, to be published later.

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