

Eagle kites fake out blackbirds, preventing disaster for farmers

By LONNIE THIELE
Staff writer

Three or four blackbirds aren't a problem, neither is several hundred or even several thousand for that matter, but put a million or more of them together and they spell d-i-s-a-s-t--e-r, primarily for some area rice farmers.

"They damage milo quite a bit, also damage corn, primarily rice," said Robert Byrd, wildlife specialist with the USDA's Wildlife Service. "Damages range from zero to very little to half the rice crop to blackbirds. Loss is either by consumption, knocking grains on the ground or when they take it to sell there is so much bird feces, they won't take it."

Byrd said August through September are key times blackbirds damage crops.

"They really like rice when it's at the dough stage, soft, milky. The worse area for blackbirds is between Morehouse and Dexter and on south," he said.

"Farmers also have a problem if their rice is ripe before or after surrounding fields.

"They are a big problem for

sunflower farmers, not so much here because we don't have many sunflower fields. In North Dakota they can decimate a field."

For several years Byrd has used propane cannons, pyrotechnics, distress tapes, calls, and on occasion he has recommended honking horns to dispel black-birds. And a few farmers have even tried shotguns, which aren't usually very effective unless there are several shooters involved. There is even a repellent on the market this year producers can spray on rice.

Byrd is always looking for new ways to get rid of the flocks and this year he is recommending fake eagles or eagle kites.

The paper eagle kites are attached to a six-foot string which is attached to a 15-foot fiberglass pole. The more the wind blows the higher the eagle soars, and blackbirds fly away.

"All the farmers that have used them so far, really like them," Byrd said. "I get compliments on them all the time."

Byrd said he put up a dozen of the eagle kites at three different farms and all three of the producers were happy with the results.



Robert Byrd, USDA wildlife specialist, has been using eagle kites to scare off blackbirds, primarily in rice fields. Above, Byrd recently installed several of the kites on the C.D. Stewart rice farm north-east of Bloomfield.

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But he is quick to point out the eagle kites aren't the final solution.

"There is no one solution to getting rid of them. This is another part of several applications to minimize damages caused by blackbirds," he said.

Bruce Beck, agronomy specialist with the University Extension Service, said overall damages from blackbirds to the area's rice crop is less than five percent but that the birds can be catastrophic to individual farmers.

"We have blackbirds every year. The damages are to the fields that mature first and are harvested last," Beck said. "Some farmers in some fields tend to have problems continuously. There are problems in towns where the birds come to roost. They can be a problem all winter long.

"It can be expensive to try to chase them away. It's important to get some assistance to know what you're doing so you don't waste a lot of money. There is help available. The wildlife specialists are there because rice farmers have asked for assistance through the USDA."

Byrd recommends having the kites in stock and when blackbirds arrive, put them out in the field. It takes as long as it takes to put the stake in the ground to have an eagle flying.

Byrd said if the eagle kites are taken up after the birds leave, they can last two or three seasons. They cost \$30 each.

Byrd still has a few eagle kites, phone 573-379-2933, or people can purchase their own kites from Jackite, Inc., 2868 West Landing Road, Virginia Beach, VA. 23456 or phone toll free at 877-JACKITE.