

Pest Birds : Problems & Solutions

As professional pest managers, we fight a constant battle against an army of pests that cause health or economic damage. This pest army is strengthened when new pests join the ranks. Very often, this is the direct result of human activity when pest problems are created where none existed. Once these pest problems created, solutions are sought.

Birds are a perfect example : in India, we are all familiar with the farmer shouting and throwing stones with catapults or sling-shots from his lookout perch in the middle of the fields or in an orchard, in an attempt to shoo away birds that descend in flocks to feed on the ripening grain or fruit. From this early concept of being pests, birds can be a more serious threat today.

When they live in close proximity to human dwellings, this threat is very real. A few birds such as the Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*, Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) are a common sight in our cities.

In terms of pest status, the Feral Pigeon is number one and is the focus of this article. It is originally called the Blue Rock Pigeon with very good reason; it nests on cliffs and rocky hillsides and forages in fields and meadows for food and water. In the natural state, it would have had a host of predators such as raptors (eagles and especially falcons) that keep its populations in check.

In our cities, the pigeon has become commensal to humans; the lack of habitat for raptors means they can now thrive without fear of their natural enemies : with easy access to sources of food and water, they have never had it so good. Another significant fact is that easy access to feeding and watering sites means that even old, sick or injured birds live longer than they would have done in the natural state. This causes unnaturally large flocks.

And where do these large flocks of pigeons live? They simply choose from plenty of potential roosting and nesting sites right next to us, in our buildings! Experts use the term “Pressure” when describing the extent of bird ‘infestation’; it is the propensity of the bird to come to the site. Light pressure would mean the birds come there to socialize (sunbathe, etc); Medium pressure would mean the birds prefer the site to socialize and roost (sleep at night). Heavy pressure means that it is a suitable site for nesting (most preferred) and the birds would be really determined not to let go of it.

Pigeons are associated with many human diseases caused by air-borne pathogens and dust from their droppings, such Chlamydia, Cryptococcus, Histoplasma, Allergens, Pneumonia, Meningitis and Lung damage (and possibly death). In addition, several bacteria such as *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, *Campylobacter* & *Eserichia coli*, which can cause food poisoning, are also spread by pigeons.

Their nests can lead to secondary pest infestations of blood feeders (fleas, lice, bugs and mites), fabric pests (mealworms, spider beetles, carpet beetles, clothes moths), carrion flies and beetles and wood pests (furniture beetles, death watch beetles). Besides being an nuisance, pigeons can also directly cause economic damage and contamination in commercial facilities. Their droppings are acidic in nature and can

cause corrosion and defacement of buildings, besides being a safety hazard – they are extremely slippery when wet!

A very important fact to consider is that people actually like pigeons. It is a common sight to see old and young feeding them at parks and promenades and fancy breeds are also kept as pets. Many people believe that by feeding pigeons, they are appeasing their ancestors, so they do not like to harm them. Thus, any solution has to be humane without causing injury or death to the birds.

Bird-proofing measures, such as nets, spikes or wires provide an effective means to prevent the birds from roosting or nesting in the protected building. This is by no means a simple job and requires skill and knowledge of both pigeon behaviour and architecture. Building owners are very particular about the look of their building and concerned about the elevation, etc.

A bird-proofing job has often to be carried out at great heights so technicians have to be trained and have to use protective gear and harness at all times. Technicians have to guard against damage to building surfaces and there is no scope for mistakes, with everything needed to be done right and thoroughly the first time round – one cannot go back up to make corrections or changes!

The choice of bird-proofing tool, whether net, spikes, wires or a combination of any of the three, is made based on the species of bird, area to be protected and the pressure the building faces. For example, wires are good for light pressure while nets are suitable for all kinds of pressure and sometimes, there can be different species of birds in the same place. Thus, the requirements of the individual situation cannot be ignored and the pest manager has to make a sensible and cost-effective decision everytime.

A holistic approach, taking into account every single detail is the right way. The professional pest manager has to think everything through and taking the customer into confidence is essential. Otherwise, as they say, making costly mistakes is easy!