



Feeding birds may largely be considered a kindly act towards one of nature's innocent little creatures. But as pigeons invade buildings leaving their droppings behind, or while angry gulls try to snatch food from your hands, it is time to cry *fowl* and set loose the predators

Do you remember the scene in *Mary Poppins* where Michael Banks asks his father for tuppence to feed the birds? Father was unimpressed, "Fiddlesticks, boy! Feed the birds and what have you got?" "Fat birds," came the reply. If young Michael tried to feed the birds today, the response might well be, "You're nicked!" Five years ago, feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square became an offence, fine £50. Cor blimey, *Mary Poppins*.

Despite the protestations of the Save the Trafalgar Square Pigeon Campaign, which only last month presented an (unsuccessful) petition to Gordon Brown demanding the byelaws prohibiting the feeding of the birds be repealed, pigeons are no longer welcome visitors to many town centres or properties. And neither are gulls, which have moved away from coastal locations to inland towns and business parks, attracted by the easy living that man-made nesting opportunities offer.

Martin Freeman, managing director of specialist building services provider ProTen, explains their unpopularity. "Bird infestations on buildings can create a number of serious problems, including a threat to human health, safety concerns and structural damage," he says. "The sheer weight of bird fouling can lead to structural collapse, particularly of ceilings. The appearance of bird fouling also presents a negative image of your business to your customers."

Birds can have a negative impact on your workforce as well, with bird droppings harbouring a multitude of nasties. They can create slip-trip hazards on walkways and loading bays and cause acidic erosion to metal structures and paintwork. And the gull can, according to Ian Cain, area manager Scotland

FM QUICK FACTS

- Bird droppings can transmit 60 different diseases, including ornithosis, a flu like disease, allergic alveolitis, also known as "Pigeon Fancier's Lung", a breathing problem, histoplasmosis and salmonella through contaminating water sources

of NBC Bird and Pest Solutions, "become very aggressive at nesting time and around food." Have you ever got close up and personal with a hungry gull? Not to be recommended.

And it's not only old structures that suffer from generations of roosting birds. Cain quotes the case of a new building which had its rainwater harvesting system trashed by nesting gulls soon after it opened. The architects, it seems, thought the preventative measures spoiled the lines of their creation.

But simply cleaning up the building, removing nesting materials and accumulated guano can be costly and difficult, requiring protectively clad operatives working at height with the possible complication of confronting aggressive gulls. It's not a job for the fainthearted, and not to be considered unless the resident bird population has already been moved on.

In times past, we would have set traps. The stragglers would have been quickly despatched by bullet. Now, the law relating to the removal and culling of birds is complex, and it is unacceptable, not to say illegal, to take pot-shots at the intruders. Shooting should only be used in extreme cases, where a real health-and-safety risk to humans can be proved, and it should be carried out by RSPCA-trained professionals.

By a process of egg removal, birth-control pills and food deprivation, problem birds can be managed out of most sites over a period of three to five years, and while ethically sound, this is not the speedy response that most building occupants would wish to see.

But there is a quicker method. The use of hunting birds has proved to work and is growing in popularity. As David Van Vynck of Van Vynck Avian Solutions explains: "Demand has grown steadily and has been fuelled in the last three to four years by a realisation within the pest control industry that this



type of control is both effective and maintainable.” A skilled handler with a well-trained bird can clear a site of unwanted visitors without recourse to poisons, potions or pellets.

British Pest Control Training has recently introduced a qualification in Bird Management, although the standard is not yet widely accepted within the industry. Mike Bromley, the training manager, says: “Bird management is something of an art. To do it well, you need to be a skilled craftsman”.

Van Vynck says you should always look for any supplier to have this accreditation. And Cain has further advice. “Always ask, ‘Do you fly the bird,’” he says, adding that actively working the bird will give better results than just displaying it on a stand. He also recommends asking for references from previous clients. He believes that inexperience within the sector could be a big risk to its credibility.

Making your buildings inaccessible or unattractive will prevent problem birds returning. This can be achieved by netting cut to shape, provided with access panels for cleaners and coloured to be rendered almost invisible to the naked eye. It’s a popular option, used, according to Freeman “increasingly for roof structures to protect from nesting and loafing gulls”.

Other options include post and wire systems, blunt needles or a gel applied to prevent birds from landing. In remote areas of larger sites, audible scares using replicated distress calls can work well, and our local town hall sports a replica bird of prey staring out, malevolently, daring the pigeons to come closer.

But whatever method used, it must be appropriate, and Martin Freeman provides sound advice. “It is essential that the species of pest bird is identified,” he says, “as the proofing system used must be suitable for the size and habits of the birds in question”.

Van Vynck points out that physical deterrents need to be properly maintained to remain effective, and birds have one huge advantage over their human adversaries: they are very good at accessing small, difficult-to-reach places high above ground. This is why many organisations continue to use hawks to keep buildings clear of those causing problems.

The other key action is to cut off the birds’ food supply. Van Vynck believes this is one of the most effective methods. Also, in the summer months, the consequences of feeding, or inadvertently leaving food for birds should be fully explained to staff who eat outside.

In Aberdeenshire, Cain says, the NBC have worked with local authorities to remove problem gulls from school sites. They had learned to associate the school’s lunch bell with feeding time and would aggressively hassle the children, and users of nearby snack outlets, for food. Hawks were introduced, and their handlers stressed the importance of not dropping food litter, before putting the hunters to work, chasing away the gulls. **FM**

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BIRD OF PREY PUTS PIGEONS TO FLIGHT

The use of birds of prey as a deterrent to problem birds can serve the dual function of pest control and providing public entertainment.

Ian Cain of NBC says that hawks are used to control pigeons at Hampden Park in Glasgow. One of the working birds has been named Archie and displays by the bird have been incorporated into the experience of fans visiting the stadium. The stadium’s managers see this as positive publicity. It can also bring other benefits by helping to reduce the amount of food waste left after events.

NBC stresses the importance of cleaning up quickly after an event and say this message should be passed on to visitors.

In reply to concerns that visitors may be upset by the sight of a hawk diving on, and killing, a pigeon, Cain simply says, “I’ve never seen that happen.”

David Van Vynck reminds us that the Duke of Wellington successfully advised Queen Victoria to use sparrowhawks to control sparrows when the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace opened in 1854. Whether this was part of a public spectacle is unrecorded.