

## BLACKBIRD AND RACCOON MANAGEMENT IN SWEET CORN

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Red-winged blackbirds are the most abundant bird in North America and Ohio has the highest populations of blackbirds of any U. S. state. Redwings and common grackles, another blackbird species, cause considerable damage to sweet corn and other grain crops in Ohio. Significant damage usually occurs in fields located within 5 miles of marshes where blackbirds congregate in late summer to roost at night. During the day, these birds fly out to corn fields and other agricultural areas to feed.

Blackbirds begin searching for insects in sweet corn fields at the time of silking. If insects such as ear worms, corn borers and especially root worm beetles are abundant in a field during the 14 days between silking and kernel formation, blackbirds will habituate to the field, feeding extensively on the insects. Then the birds will switch and feed extensively on the corn kernels during the 4-7 day period between kernel formation and harvest. Studies have shown that management strategies to minimize insects in sweet corn fields during the period between silking and harvest will also help reduce blackbird numbers and damage.

Blackbirds have difficulty opening ears with long, heavy husks. Thus, the use of varieties with these characteristics is recommended in specific fields or locations prone to damage. Research also indicates blackbirds prefer yellow kernels to white kernels. Blackbirds prefer sweet corn at the same maturity as do humans and flocks can cause extensive damage in a matter of hours. Therefore, timing harvest at the earliest possible time is advisable for high damage locations.

Propane exploders can help keep blackbirds out of fields, especially if backed up with shotgun patrols that kill some birds. Exploders should be elevated above the corn and moved around every few days. Eye-spot ballons and mylar reflective ribbons may have some utility in small fields. Leaving recently harvested wheat, oat and corn fields unplowed during the period sweet corn is vulnerable is important because it gives blackbirds alternate feeding sites when they are driven out of the sweet corn.

Raccoon damage has increased in Ohio sweet corn fields in recent years because of major increases in raccoon populations. Populations have increased because of reduced trapping pressure due to low fur prices. Thus, all sweet corn growers should buy their spouses raccoon fur coats.

Raccoons can be particularly destructive in sweet corn because individuals often feed wastefully, sampling numerous ears as they wander through a field at night. Raccoons are easily captured in walk-in live traps baited with cat food or fish. Traps should be set in late afternoon along field edges where raccoons enter and checked the next morning. Captured raccoons should be either humanely killed or relocated and released. However, relocation and release is permitted only in counties without incidences of distemper or rabies. Two-strand electric fencing set 10" and 20" from the ground can also discourage raccoons from entering fields.