

# THE INTERSECTION OF PUBLIC POLICY AND BLACKBIRDS USING THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S BLACKBIRD-POISONING PROGRAM

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the position of the National Audubon Society regarding the management of blackbirds.

**Key words:** Audubon, blackbirds, red-winged blackbirds, songbirds, Wildlife Services.

The United States government is proposing to slaughter millions of animals in the western prairies. No, this is not the late 1800s when the targets were buffalo. This is the year 2002, and this time the target is red-winged blackbirds. In fact, implementing the proposed blackbird-poisoning program would be one of the largest bird killing efforts ever conducted by the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The public policy question boils down to this: Should the USDA professionals poison 2 million blackbirds a year for 3 years (for a total of 6 million dead blackbirds) to protect sunflower at the expense of U.S. taxpayers?

Audubon answers this question with a resounding 'No!'.

The blackbird-poisoning program is not justified on scientific or economic grounds. In addition, the very serious problem of killing other bird species, especially grassland songbirds, is not satisfactorily addressed. The American public strongly opposes poisoning millions of blackbirds.

The science to justify the blackbird-poisoning program is weak. The blackbird poisoning conducted by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in the Dakotas from 1994 to 1999 by its own measures did not demonstrate that mass killing of blackbirds is effective in reducing sunflower damage. In fact, the killing of blackbirds as proposed might actually increase the red-winged blackbird populations through various population compensation mechanisms. This would again result in a failure of the poisoning program to meet the goal of reducing sunflower damage.

Estimates of the population of red-winged blackbirds we are discussing today range from 25 to 40 million birds. Some have suggested that to really have an effect in reducing sunflower damage one would have to wipe out virtually the entire population. The reaction of America's 50 million bird watchers to this proposal would be something to behold.

APHIS's proposed blackbird poisoning is not justified on economic grounds. According to Linz et al. (1997), "During the past 2 decades, studies on blackbird damage to various crops such as corn and sunflower indicate that on a statewide or regional level, overall damage is low, generally 1 to 2 percent of the crop." Furthermore, "superficial surveys of agricultural fields often overestimate the blackbird damage and thus exaggerate the overall severity of the economic threat."

Over the past 3 years, killing of blackbirds has not occurred on as massive a scale as advocated by APHIS. What effect has this had on the market for sunflowers? The recent trend for sunflower prices has been up. In fact, this year prices are high due to current world market conditions. U. S. farm programs and disaster payments have been a safety net for sunflower producers when prices have been low. With no killing of blackbirds by APHIS, sunflower producers are overall doing quite well. Or in other words, there is no real economic justification for the blackbird-poisoning program.

The blackbird killing proposed by APHIS carries significant risk of death to other bird species. The APHIS proposal is to use DRC-1339 on rice baits. Toxicological data gathered by APHIS, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) indicates that DRC-1339 is an effective avicide and poses a high to very high risk to most bird species. This is hardly surprising news since the purpose of DRC-1339 is to kill birds.

DRC-1339-treated rice is spread in harvested crop fields in the spring. Blackbirds, attracted to the poison banquet, eat the rice and die. APHIS has repeatedly suggested that other bird species or nontarget birds do not eat the poisoned rice and are therefore unaffected or do not die.

The fact that nontarget birds will not be attracted to a poison banquet is a highly suspect assumption. This assumption can be put to the test by as simple an experiment as filling your backyard bird feeder. When I put out a banquet in my backyard all kinds of bird species come to help themselves. And it is not just birds,

but squirrels too. A banquet is a banquet – poisoned or not.

APHIS makes sure that the poisoned banquet is especially tempting for wildlife by laying the food out in the spring. This attracts birds and other wildlife because food sources, especially insects, are limited in early spring. The poisoned rice also looks very tasty because the birds are migrating. The poisoned rice is a ready buffet for any bird to eat, but especially those who are tired and hungry from flying.

The USFWS summarized the nontarget bird concerns in a January 7, 2000, letter to the North Dakota APHIS field office. The letter points out, “Approximately 68 species of nontarget birds have been observed in or near sunflower fields in the spring, including 32 granivorous species of which 9 species are species identified as being of management concern.”

What are some of these 68 species of birds? Many of these birds are grassland songbirds like the grasshopper sparrow, lark bunting, and bobolink. Scott Weidensaul in his excellent book on problems facing migratory birds, “Living on the wind,” describes the plight of grassland songbirds, “Yet the group most in need of help in the pothole region – in fact, the cadre of birds facing the worst population decline in all of North America – don’t quack. They are grassland songbirds, and their crisis has been as nearly invisible as it is frightening. Taken as a whole, grassland birds have declined faster, for a longer period, and over a wider area than any other group of species – they have fared worse than neotropical forest songbirds, worse than marshland birds, and certainly worse than waterfowl.”

The birds showing up as dinner guests at APHIS’s poisoned banquet are some of the most threatened birds in America. The grassland songbirds are grain-eating, ground-feeding birds that migrate through the Dakotas in the spring. Eight of the bird species observed around the poisoned plots are on Audubon’s Watch List. Nine species have been identified by the federal government as being of management concern as the USFWS noted. It is unacceptable that the federal government, using taxpayer dollars, be directly involved in the killing of grassland songbirds.

The absence of nontarget carcasses after baiting with DRC-1339 does not mean that grassland songbirds and other nontarget birds are not being killed. Again, as noted by the USFWS, DRC-1339 can take 2 or 3 days to kill a bird. Thus, the bird can die a good distance from the poisoned bait. Due to the efficiency of scavengers, bird bodies do not last long. A USEPA study (Balcomb 1986) found that 76.9% of bird carcasses are gone in 24 hours.

Audubon strongly and actively supports farmers and decent, livable farm income. We work closely with farmers here in North Dakota and across the country in a variety of ways. We lobbied hard and successfully for conservation programs in the new farm bill. The new Grasslands Reserve Program is one of the results of that effort. We also worked for funding for the Farmland Protection Program to keep working farms working rather than falling to urban sprawl.

Audubon believes there are solutions to red-winged blackbird depredation on sunflowers that do not involve the slaughter of millions of blackbirds and other bird species. A blackbird insurance program is one such idea that both protects farm income and keeps blackbirds and other birds alive. The just-passed farm bill (Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, 2002) authorizes spending \$175 billion over the next 6 years. That is real money by any standards, even in Washington, D. C. Clearly, there is enough money in farm programs to provide for protection from blackbird losses. This is especially true if there is enough money for killing millions of blackbirds.

So, let us not turn the clock back to the late 1800s when the indiscriminate slaughter of wildlife on the prairie was acceptable. When a program like the poisoning of millions of red-winged blackbirds is proposed, the public policy response must be one of skepticism. When the proposed killing of millions of blackbirds cannot be justified on scientific or economic grounds, the public policy response must be — do not implement this flawed program. When the proposed poisoning would kill some of the most threatened songbirds in America, grassland songbirds, it is time to look for new solutions.

We at Audubon look forward to working with all interested parties to find a solution that protects farmers’ income without a 21<sup>st</sup> century of slaughter of wildlife on the western prairies.

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