

Birds Combat Civilization

Lynne Clive (Marilynn Rashid)

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Humankind truly was not meant to fly, and birds keep trying to tell us so. As people and their flying machines continue to overpopulate the skies, not only do plane -to-plane collisions increase, but bird to plane collisions drastically increase as well, especially since new technology has created sleeker and quieter engines which sneak up on birds and scarcely give them any warning of their approach. Needless to say, it is the birds which must attempt to change their natural flight patterns to avoid fatal collisions.

Seagulls have become a particularly confounding nuisance to airport officials in Michigan. As their natural feeding grounds along the Great Lakes become more and more polluted, they drift inland. Wet runways peppered with worms and grasshoppers provide a perfect new feeding ground for seagulls. Cherry Capital Airport near Traverse City has reported large flocks of seagulls, as many as 150 at a time.

Approximately 1,200 plane-bird collisions occur each year, causing \$20 to \$30 million in damage. Such collisions prove fatal for the birds, of course; however, they have also been responsible for many aircraft crashes fatal to human beings. Sixty-two people were killed in 1960 near Boston when a propeller-driven plane sucked in several starlings and lost power.

Birds seem to be waging all-out war against the U.S. Air Force. In 1983, they reported 2,300 bird collisions; and 300 of these each caused more than \$1,000 in damage. This past summer in Great Britain, a U.S. Air Force crew was forced to bail out of their F111 jet when a 12-pound goose smashed into the protective covering on the nose of the jet. The jet, worth \$30.9 million, is now quietly at rest on the bottom of the North Sea.

So what does civilized man do to combat the situation? In Traverse City, airport employees run around the airfield chasing gulls away with "cracker shells" fired from shotguns. They play tapes on loudspeakers of the cries of wounded seagulls, and they're considering putting up hawk silhouettes to see if that might do the trick. Someone has invented something called a "chicken gun" or a "rooster booster" which hurls four-pound chicken carcasses into the windshields of aircraft at speeds over 500 mph to test their strength against bird collisions. These tests are presently taking place on Air Force jets.

BASH (Bird Air Strike Hazard Team) was organized by the U.S. Air Force in 1975 after three F111 jets were lost due to bird collisions. This team, made up of Air Force biologists, travels to U.S. bases around the world, targeting bird trouble-spots and trying to come up with innovative ideas (like the rooster booster) to deal with the problem.

Modern industrial-technological civilizations are based on and geared to the destruction of the natural order. They pollute the air and feeding grounds of wildlife; they chase birds from the skies. They construct buildings like the Renaissance Center in Detroit with mirror-like reflective shells which confuse birds and cause them to crash into them.

As our buildings grow taller and as we fly higher and higher, as we overpopulate our skies with our deadly contrivances, we lose sight of our true and now former place on the earth. We myopically look only at tomorrow. We can marvel at the exquisite beauty of a single bird through a pair of binoculars and then, with the same eye, turn and marvel at a newly constructed skyscraper or a supersonic jet—man's artifices which are responsible for killing flocks of such birds.

If anyone were to suggest to the BASH team that the best way to stop bird-plane collisions would be to stop flying altogether, they would, of course, think you insane—or perhaps “bird-brained.” But what is so bad about bird brains? If we acknowledge the message our bird cousins are sending us, maybe it isn’t such a bad idea after all.

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