

Chapter 12: Controlling Birds



Compiled by
Kathleen Grady, Oilseed Breeder and Extension Specialist (retired)
Ruth Beck, SDSU Extension Agronomy Field Specialist (retired)
Charles Edinger, Sunflower producer

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Sunflower is vulnerable to damage by several bird species. The greatest losses occur from migrating flocks of red-winged blackbirds, yellow-headed blackbirds, and common grackles. Fields located near cattail marshes are especially susceptible to bird damage. Blackbirds often roost in the cattail marshes at night and feed in nearby sunflower, small grain, or corn fields during the day. Before these crops mature and become vulnerable to damage, the blackbirds feed on insects and weed seeds. Once the birds become used to feeding in a particular area, it becomes more difficult to get them to move.

Blackbird control measures consist of cultural practices used in combination with frightening methods to move birds out of the areas where sunflower fields are located (Fig. 12.1 and Fig. 12.2). Do not plant sunflowers near cattail marshes or woodlots. Producers can leave blank rows or strips every 2 to 300 feet in large fields to provide access for scaring birds from the center of the field or alternatively, later in the season trails can be made in strategic locations with a four wheeler. Planting at the same time as neighbors will reduce damage that often occurs to early- or late-ripening fields.



Figure 12.1. A four wheeler pushing down sunflowers to make trails for bird monitoring (Photo courtesy of Charlie Edinger)



Figure 12.2. A trail in sunflowers made by four wheeler, to monitor birds. (Photo courtesy of Charlie Edinger)

Some hybrids possess morphological traits that make them more bird resistant. These traits include concave heads, horizontally-oriented heads, and long head-to-stem distance. Hybrids possessing these traits must be planted in north-south rows to avoid overlapping of plants at maturity, which would offset some of their seed-protecting characteristics. In addition, the use of shorter varieties can make it easier for producers to locate birds and target control measures where birds are feeding.

Weed seeds are an attractive food source for blackbirds. Good weed control will help prevent blackbirds from establishing a feeding pattern in weedy fields before the sunflower crop matures. Consider planting lure or trap crops on diverted acres in areas of high bird risk to keep birds out of susceptible crops. Harvesting sunflower as early as possible will reduce exposure to bird damage. Desiccants may be used after sunflowers reach physiological maturity to speed dry down and allow for earlier harvest.

Cattail marshes can be managed with an aquatic herbicide (Rodeo) to remove cattails used as roosting sites for blackbirds. Generally, the herbicide must be applied the year before sunflowers are planted in the vicinity of the marsh to allow time for the cattails to decompose.

Begin harassment of blackbird flocks as soon as birds are seen in the area, regardless of their diet. Deterring infestations of local birds early in the season, can help to reduce infestations of migrating birds that occur later in the season. Early bird infestations can be more damaging to the crop, as more seeds are required to satisfy their appetite. If producers are persistent with shotguns or rifles when the birds first begin to visit the fields, the use of cannons with daily monitoring will be much more effective the remainder of the season.

Automatic exploders or bird-scaring cannons detonate a gas to produce a loud explosion. Place these devices

on a stand above the crop, and operate from just before sunrise until the birds head for their roosting sites at night. Move the exploder every few days, because the birds may become accustomed to the noise if the device is operated in the same place day after day. Another option is to set the propane cannons to run during the night where the birds roost. This can annoy the birds (difficult to sleep) and may cause the birds to move elsewhere. One exploder can generally protect 10-20 acres of sunflowers.

Use of a .22 rifle can often give good results in frightening blackbirds from sunflower fields. Use this method only with extreme care in areas where it is legal and safe. Fire the rifle from a high position into the midst of settling birds, and then fire several more rounds into the lifting flock. One rifle can protect about 100 acres. Some producers may prefer using a 12 gauge shotgun, as it will have more volume than a .22. In addition one shell has potential to impact more birds if they are in a group. As mentioned earlier, persistence early in the season can help reduce bird damage throughout the remainder of the season.

Electronic frightening devices are available that broadcast distress calls of blackbirds. They can be effective, but use is limited because of their high cost and limited broadcast range.

Pyrotechnic products are effective at frightening birds but can pose both personal and fire hazards. These products include firecrackers, flares, whistlers, and cracker-shells. Wear safety glasses and hearing protection when using any of these products. Do not use during dry periods when fire risk is high.

Selected References

Grady, K. 2000. Sunflower Production. South Dakota State University. Extension Circulars. Paper 478. http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_circ/478



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