

A&M a popular stop for birds

by Tricia Parker
Battalion reporter

Texas A&M is engaged in an ongoing battle to drive away birds roosting in trees at the center of campus. And A&M may even be winning.

Dr. Keith A. Arnold, professor in the Department of Wildlife Science, says the blackbirds, which decorate the sidewalks around the Academic Building with their droppings, are mostly grackles, starlings and cowbirds.

When the birds first arrived on campus in the 1940s, Arnold says, they were referred to as "uncommon summer residents." Now, he says, they are here to stay.

Arnold says that although no one really knows why the birds have migrated here, it may be because of an abundance of grain in the area. Urbanization and the loss of wooded lots in the area also may be contributing factors, Arnold says.

The full extent of the Aggie

bird problem became apparent during the winter of 1977-78 when, over the Christmas break, the campus was invaded by an estimated 1.5 million blackbirds, says the director of the Department of Ground Maintenance, Eugene H. Ray.

The birds took shelter in the live oaks surrounding the Academic Building, Ray says, and proceeded to cover the sidewalks, bicycles and even people with bird droppings. The fecal material was an inch deep in some places, he says.

In addition to the general nuisance and Hitchcock-like atmosphere they created, Ray says the birds were costing the University a fortune in ground maintenance — about \$20,000 each month.

So, in January 1978, the Departments of Wildlife Science and Ground Maintenance mobilized to fight the invasion. At first, Ray says, conventional "weapons" were used to fight the birds.

Ray got permission from the

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to shoot the birds. This proved unpopular with the student body as well as inhumane, he says.

Maintenance people did notice, however, that the sound of the shotguns was just as effective as actually killing the birds.

So, armed only with trashcan lids, the grounds maintenance employees crept out at dusk, and in a style reminiscent of tiger hunts, beat the lids to flush out their quarry, Ray says. This was effective but primitive, he says.

Next, Ray says, they tried exploding firecrackers and hanging burlap sacks in trees, also with little success.

In desperation, he says, maintenance employees brought out the heavy artillery. They began stalking the birds with a noise-making propane-using cannon. Ray says the tremendous noise produced by the cannon was still not effective enough in dispersing the birds.

Then came the present model, the bazooka of anti-bird warfare. The latest weapon uses a tape of the distress call of a starling as well as the propane cannon to scare away birds.

The tape is hooked up to an amplifier and mounted on a truck with the cannon, Ray says. The tape is broadcast at intervals, alternating with the firing of the cannon.

Ray says if the truck is used three or four nights in a row, it forces the birds to retreat to the fringes of campus where they are less of a nuisance.

But, the call and the cannon are so loud that Ray would rather not use the equipment when students are on campus.

Until now, Ray says, they have used the truck only during the Christmas vacation and during the break between the summer and fall sessions of school. But if the need becomes great enough, he says, he will run the truck during Thanksgiving or

even on an away-game weekend.

Dr. Arnold says he doesn't believe the birds will become immune to the harassment because their average life span is only one to two years.

"If they had nowhere else to go, they might become used to the harassment," Arnold says. "But as it is they'll just roost somewhere else."

He says the cannon and tape are an effective, inexpensive short-term solution. The only real solution, he says, is trimming the trees.

The birds are attracted to the trees because of the shelter their lush foliage provides, Arnold says. If the limbs are trimmed annually, they offer a less hospitable home to the birds, Arnold says.

"It is an expensive but long-term solution," Arnold says.

Arnold says a small roost is on campus right now, about 40,000 birds, but more birds can be expected if the winter is especially harsh.

Ants unlimited

by Stephanie Marshall
Battalion reporter

It was a Friday night and my roommate had just finished a romantic dinner with her boyfriend. When she returned to the kitchen, she discovered many more dinner guests than she had planned. Our condominium had been invaded by...ANTS.

Not having a weapon to defend ourselves with, we went to our strong, handsome neighbors, who bravely handed us a bottle of ant-and-roach killer to kill our own bugs.

"We tried to beat, kick, squish, squash, scream, and even sweet talk them out of our condominium, but they just kept coming back for more," said Kathi Washburn, a local resident.

What should one do if he finds himself with ants that overstay their welcome, if they were ever welcome in the first place?

First, try to kill them with a can of ant killer, one way or another. If the ants insist upon staying, then reporting the invasion to an apartment manager or resident adviser (if it occurs in a dorm) will be the best solution to the problem.

"As long as you have people with food in their dorm rooms,

cookies and crackers for example, then you'll have a problem with insects," says Beth Castenson, head resident of Mosher.

Castenson says insects are exterminated in the dorms during the Christmas and summer breaks each year.

But who's to say that the exterminator got everyone of those critters? There's always the one that got away and created another one, that created another, that created another...

"The ants are so bad in our dorm that they get into our closets and crawl around in our clothes," Julie Troy, an Underwood Hall resident. "It's downright gross!"

If you are one of the lucky people who has ants that survived the extermination, that then go forth to multiply, the best thing to do is to grin and bear it. Perhaps sending the Welcome Wagon lady (or ant) with gifts to the antbeds, setting out a plate of cookies on the counter or even throwing a party in their honor would be the polite thing to do. But whatever way the situation may be handled, you now have some new roommates. Treat them as you want them to treat you.

As for the infestation of ants in our condominium, the extermination method worked. They really zapped those suckers. All's well that ends well!

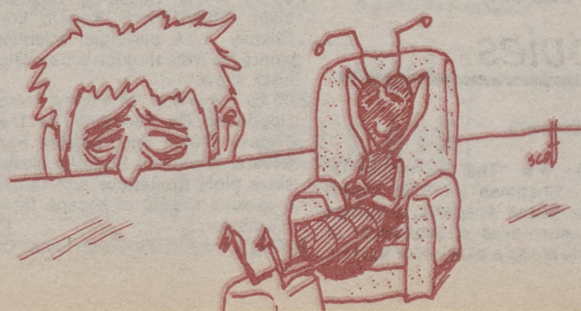


photo by Hope Paasch

Exotic wildlife finds home at vet school

by Ann Ramsbottom
Battalion staff

A variety of livestock and pet species are routine patients at the Texas A&M college of veterinary medicine. Occasionally, however, the not-so-common animals have to be treated too.

Take for instance, Mr. E. Guana, a now permanent resident of the college of veterinary medicine. Mr. E. Guana, an iguana (reptile), came to A&M with a nutritional deficiency.

"When Mr. E. Guana came nine months ago, he couldn't walk or eat and he had a deformed jaw," said Dr. Elizabeth Russo, veterinary clinical associate of small animal medicine. "That's exactly why people shouldn't have exotic animals as pets. People don't understand the nutritional requirements of these animals."

Because of Mr. E. Guana's severe condition when he was

brought to A&M, he was donated to the University. Guana, who lost his teeth because of his deficiency, now will be used for veterinary students to have "hands-on-experience" with, and will be displayed in the reception area of the clinic.

A few years ago a boa constrictor was brought in because he hadn't eaten for a year. The problem was diagnosed as an environmental problem. The snake had been kept in an air-conditioned atmosphere. He was too cold and simply wouldn't eat, Russo said.

However, snakes usually aren't a problem. They eat whole animals and therefore, a balanced diet.

Much is known about bird nutrition, Russo said. However, many owners still have their exotic birds on an all-seed diet when they should be supplemented with vegetables and fruits.

"People are usually willing to pay to have their exotic animals treated," Russo said.

Occasionally, people are willing to pay large sums to have their not-so-exotic pets treated. Russo recalled a \$200 bill for the treatment of a uterine infection in a guinea pig.

Basically, the college of veterinary medicine serves as an outpatient clinic for common problems, however, many problem cases are referred to the school.

"We're sort of a clearing house for difficult cases," said Dr. Jeff Watkins, veterinary clinical associate for large animals.

Most of the larger exotic animals come in to be treated for orthopedic problems. Some of these animals are dangerous and must be restrained by the use of an immobilizing gun. "You can't work on them while they're awake," Russo said.

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