

INFORM

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# BIRD CONTROL



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*Fig. 1: A roof space with bird droppings.*

## BIRD CONTROL

Over time, humankind has come to encroach on the habitat of wild birds. As a result, they now inhabit our towns and cities in increasing numbers. Whilst in some ways they enhance the urban environment, if uncontrolled, they can cause serious damage to buildings. This INFORM guide seeks to examine measures which can be taken to minimise the threat birds pose to our built heritage and the ways in which they can be controlled.

### Problems birds create

Any bird can be considered a pest, if it is damaging a building. The main species of birds which cause problems for buildings are pigeons, house sparrows, seagulls and starlings. It is important to identify what species of bird is causing a problem before establishing a strategy to control it. For example, mesh suitable to prevent a seagull from gaining entry to a



*Fig. 2: Apart from being unsightly, the bird droppings can also lead to corrosion of the metal*

building would not be effective in controlling access by house sparrows. Likewise, some forms of sonic deterrent are species specific.

Birds can cause problems to buildings and their occupants in a variety of ways. For example, bird droppings can leave stains on the exterior of walls and roofs. This has a negative impact on the visual appearance of buildings and can also initiate decay (Fig. 1). Feathers, droppings, and dead birds can block rainwater goods such as gutters and downpipes, leading to a variety of water ingress problems. Nests and droppings can act as a breeding ground for bacteria and insects posing a health risk to the occupants of buildings. If birds are allowed unhindered access to a building, the build-up of droppings and other related biological matter inside a building can be considerable over time. Bird droppings are acidic in nature and, as such, can cause long-term deterioration to building



*Fig. 3: Netting is used here to protect the detailed carvings over this entrance way.*

fabric, such as sandstone. On reaction with water, bird droppings can also produce a mould which can attack masonry. They can also be highly corrosive to metal which can be particularly problematic to statues and memorials (Fig. 2). Birds themselves can also be carriers of disease and there is a potential allergy risk to humans, which can cause both respiratory and skin issues from the presence of birds within buildings. There are two main approaches to controlling bird problems: physical and environmental.

## **Physical methods of bird control:**

### **Netting:**

Netting strung across openings and over roosting sites to physically prevent birds gaining access can be employed to restrict the impact birds have on buildings. It is worth noting that bird netting comes in various mesh sizes, so it is important to ensure that the appropriate size of mesh is utilized. Care should be taken not to allow fixings which may damage building fabric and, ideally, fixings should be non-ferrous and made into the joints between masonry units whenever possible. Netting is effective in preventing birds from entering a building, but the downside is that it is



*Fig. 4: In this case, the netting completely surrounds the carvings making it quite difficult to see the detail.*

visually intrusive (Fig. 3-4).

### **Wire coil systems and bird spikes**

Wire coil systems are similar to bird spikes but use protruding coils rather than projecting pins. It is therefore safer to use where children may have access. The installation of bird spikes has become one of the most common deterrents used in recent years. Birds spikes (Fig. 5) consist of a dense pattern of pins attached to strips which are secured to ledges and other surfaces to deter birds from landing on them. This is a highly effective method at deterring birds, but it can create a significant visual impact. One of the





*Fig. 5: The top of this carving is protected by bird spikes.*

major advantages spikes have over other deterrents is that, if installed correctly, they should be completely reversible as, for example, they can be cable tied to gutters and pipes.

### **Spring wire**

The installation of the spring wire (Fig. 6) on flat surfaces is a further physical method of deterring birds. The system consists of vertical metal posts, or eyes, through which wire is connected or passed. The system is less visually intrusive than spikes but can still pose problems for building owners.



*Fig. 6: The top of this column is protected by spring wire attached to vertical supports.*

The posts have to be glued or, more commonly, drilled and cemented into building fabric, causing irreversible damage to masonry. Water can settle in the drilled holes, if the eye is not completely sealed in place, and this can cause further damage to the building fabric. Consequently, care should be taken when installing any method of physical barrier to birds.

### **Decoys**

Decoys, which are fake models of birds of prey, are designed to scare pest birds away from buildings. This is a non-lethal alternative to employing actual birds of prey and can be effective in deterring roosting. To ensure long-term effectiveness, however, they will require to be moved from time to time.

### **Gels**

Gels which are applied to exposed surfaces are also used as an anti-perch device. However, these gels can cause considerable damage to the surface onto which they are applied. The gels are often oil based and this can leach into porous masonry, visually disfiguring the building with the residue being difficult to remove.

## **Chimney pots**

Where a chimney is not in regular use, it is advisable to fit a chimney pot to prevent birds nesting there. These are fairly inexpensive and easy to install provided access can be gained.

## **Closing of gaps**

To prevent birds from gaining access to the interior of a building, it is advisable to close up external gaps over 20mm in width. Where this is not practical, there are a number of simple steps that can be taken to prevent birds gaining access. Sealing gaps under eaves and replacing fallen slates and roof tiles will help prevent access to roof spaces. When preventing birds from gaining entry, it is important not to fully seal gaps which are intended to provide ventilation. These should instead be fitted with guards which will still allow air to enter into the building.

## **Environmental methods of bird control**

### **Poison**

In the past, poison has been used to control bird populations that have affected buildings. Its use, however, is not recommended for a number of reasons. It can be dangerous to humans and can result in dead birds and decaying carcasses in hard to reach places of buildings, causing pollution and health hazards. The use of poison may also lead to a building owner inadvertently breaching animal protection laws and is therefore not advisable.

### **Shooting**

Shooting has also been used to control bird populations, but as with poisoning it has significant drawbacks in addition to the risk of collateral damage. In many instances, the dead birds can be left in inaccessible areas

causing the same problems noted where poisoning was considered. There is also the danger that birds will only be wounded, causing distress to them and members of the public.

## **Sonic devices**

Sonic devices which emit high pitched noise can be used to deter birds from areas around a building. They are more effective for some species than others and advice should be sought regarding which systems suits a particular bird problem best. Although relatively expensive, it is one of the least intrusive methods of bird control available.

## **Flying a bird of prey**

The flying of birds of prey in areas with feral bird problems has become an increasingly popular method of control. The effectiveness of this method in the long-term is only possible as a result of repeated visits. It is one of the least invasive techniques available when attempting to deter birds from a building.

## **Trapping**

Trapping can be an effective means of controlling an excess bird population. Once a certain number of birds are trapped in baited cages, they are taken away and released elsewhere. It is worth noting, however, that where pigeons are trapped they may have a tendency to return to their roosting sites.

## **Removing sources of food**

An effective way of controlling pest birds can be to remove sources of food. This reduces the breeding rates amongst birds and discourages further migration to a particular building or area. This can be addressed primarily by discouraging people from feeding birds (Fig. 7) and



*Fig. 7: Birds often get fed by pedestrians, providing a steady food source.*

the careful disposal of waste food.

It should be noted that research into this topic indicates that all lethal methods of control have some flaws and can be ineffective in the long-term. Generally, they deal with the problem as it stands and not the cause. Non-lethal methods of control which frighten birds away or which discourage roosting and feeding are generally more effective.

Furthermore, nesting birds are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), and it is illegal to hamper with a bird's nesting site or to take or destroy eggs. There are other legal restrictions on the control of certain species and this should be ascertained before any action is taken. Listed Building Consent may also be required when introducing some forms of physical bird control.

## **Conclusion**

Dealing with bird pests is not an easy task, but with thought, a solution can be found to minimise the risk to both humans and buildings. The aim of this is always to do so in a manner that is sympathetic to both buildings and the birds.

## Further reading

*SHORT GUIDE 3: The Repair and Maintenance of War Memorials*, Historic Scotland (2014).

*INFORM Guide: Growing Old Gracefully*, Historic Environment Scotland (2013).

*INFORM Guide: Cleaning Sandstone*, Historic Environment Scotland (2007).

## Further information

### HES Technical advice

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### HES Grants

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E: [grants@hes.scot](mailto:grants@hes.scot)

### The Pigeon Control Advisory Service (PiCAS)

W: [www.picasuk.com](http://www.picasuk.com)

E: [enquiries@picasuk.com](mailto:enquiries@picasuk.com)

### Scottish Natural Heritage

W: [www.nature.scot/professional-advice/safeguarding-protected-areas-and-species/protected-species/protected-species-z-guide/protected-species-birds](http://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/safeguarding-protected-areas-and-species/protected-species/protected-species-z-guide/protected-species-birds)

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The Engine Shed is Scotland's buildings conservation centre. Run by Historic Environment Scotland, it is a hub for everyone to engage with their built heritage. We offer training and education in traditional buildings, materials and skills. For more information, please see our website at [www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot) or email [technicaleducation@hes.scot](mailto:technicaleducation@hes.scot).



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