

Flock of low-flying blackbirds halts traffic on U. S. 74-76 near Chadbourn

Blankets Bladen Areas

Bird Population Explodes

By Donald M. Causey

ABBOTTSBURG — Alfred Hitchcock's movie "The Birds," shown recently on TV, had a particularly ominous meaning for residents of this section of Eastern North Carolina. For they do have an invasion by the birds.

Abbottsburg, a small community in Bladen County, is the unwilling host to one of the largest flocks of blackbirds ever seen in southeastern United States.

Every morning when they leave the roosting area and in the afternoon when they return, the birds actually darken the sky for more than half an hour. It is an awesome sight to be in the area and observe the apparently unending waves of birds as they come undulating across the tree tops like a dark blanket. One observer remarked, "It gives you a feeling of suffocating."

Residents of the area have watched the gradual build up of the flock for the past 10 years, but the suddenly exploding increase this winter has caused much concern. Bird watchers attempted to keep an estimate of the birds when they began to arrive in the fall but as the number crept up to 10,000,000 then 15,000,000 and then apparently doubled, all efforts to keep track of them ceased. There is no known method available to ornithologists in dealing with such vast numbers of birds.

As no count or reliable estimate could be made of the birds, the writer and Prof. Alfred Robenson, a biologist at Southeastern Community

College, Whiteville, surveyed the feeding range. Groups of birds were trailed and backtracked a distance of 50 miles in several directions, which indicates a possible feeding range of 7800 square miles.

What is causing this great build up in the bird population?

Farm agents in Eastern North Carolina point out that many farmers are switching from tobacco farming to small grain culture, thus giving the birds ample food. Big Juniper Bay, only two miles from Abbottsburg, is practically impenetrable by humans, thus making this a favorite rookery for several species of blackbirds. The writer and biologist Robenson had to be rescued by rescue squads and sheriff's deputies when they made their third attempt to reach the rookery last Friday night a week ago.

John McNeill, Whiteville amateur ornithologist, thinks that almost as interesting as the number of birds in the group is the number of species sharing the common roosting grounds. The boat tail and the common grackle (Brewer) are seen with the beautifully iridescent purple grackle. The red-winged blackbird is very much in evidence and a few starlings straggle along as if acting as observers.

Bladen County farm agent Ralph Sasser remarked when he visited Abbottsburg and observed the birds flying into the roost: "Farmers would be alarmed if they realized just how many birds were coming into the area."

Sasser pointed out that

agricultural practices were changing to cope with the menace. Early maturing varieties of corn and small grains are being planted in order that they could be harvested before the migrating flocks from the North and Middle West arrive in the fall. Seed corn is being treated with a repellent to discourage the birds from pulling up the young plants and eating the grain.

When farmers began asking for advice about prevention of damage by the birds, Sasser petitioned Washington for all available information on the subject. The information received was sparse and many of the publications offered more sympathy than helpful advice.

Frightening devices were suggested, but most of the devices were described as inadequate or limited in effectiveness. Cannon or gas exploders were suggested, but mechanical difficulties in many of the contrivances were reported. Use of firecrackers was described, but this practice was discouraged because it is illegal in many states and they often cause more damage to the farmers than they do to the birds. One agricultural bulletin pointed out that low-flying airplanes caused great fright to the birds, but not enough to keep them from devouring the crops. Further information about use of planes pointed out that cost of using this method could exceed the value of the crop it was attempting to protect.

Legal Reduction

The blackbirds are protected by federal law, but executive order 2426 can be used to reduce the population when it can be proved beyond a doubt that the birds did or are about to commit serious depredation. Obtaining this permit, which is hampered by restrictions, is often difficult and in some states impossible. Other bulletins describe population reduction methods of poisoning, shooting and trapping but conclude the article with the statement that these methods have little effect on the total population.

Not all Abbottsburg residents have lost their sense of humor about the birds. One crossroads gas station operator reported he liked the birds and had made an accurate count of them — 31,876,981. When asked how he had achieved this remarkable feat he said, "Twas easy; I counted their feet and divided the number by two. At first I had some trouble getting the right count until I realized that one of the birds had only one leg."

The facetious ornithologist reported that a neighbor did have some difficulty with the birds and fired his shotgun at the flock. For every bird he killed 10,000 came to the funeral.

"While I like the birds," the station operator continued, "I have worked out a plan by which they can be eliminated. If every adult in North

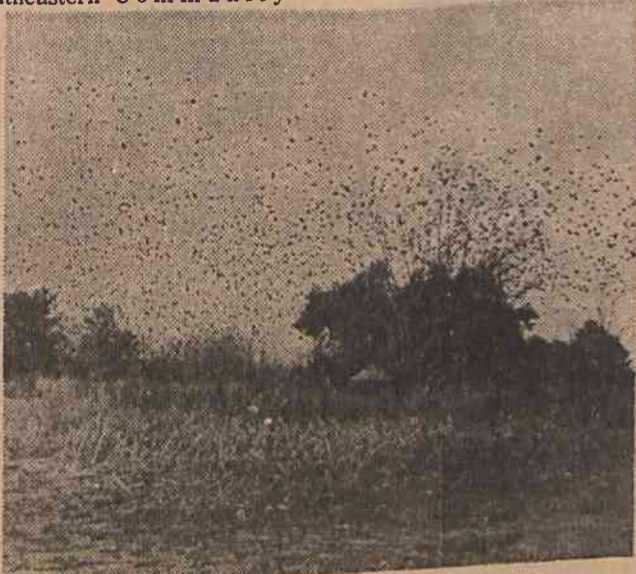
Carolina armed himself with a shotgun and 32 carloads of shells were furnished, the entire blackbird population could be eliminated in one afternoon, along with perhaps only one third of the human population. This is, however, contingent on no one missing a shot."

When the philosophizing bird lover was reminded the birds were protected by law, he reasoned it would still be a good idea to hold the gigantic shoot. He pointed out the State's financial problems would be solved; fines and court costs would swell the State's coffers to the tune of \$385,000,000, not to speak of the paltry sum of \$64,000 derived from the sales tax on the shells.

Farmers watching the huge flock wonder if all the birds will be around next spring when crops will be planted. Fortunately the answer is no.



FIELD STRIPPED—Dairyman Lexie Gooden, center, of Abbottsburg shows Bladen County farm agent Ralph Sasser, left, and Don Causey of Southeastern Community College, Whiteville, a field that had been invaded by grackles and red-wing blackbirds.



OVER MILLION—Here's a view of a flight of blackbirds which was estimated at more than one million entering a grain field near Abbottsburg in Bladen County.

