

# Getting Birds to Fly the Coop

By R. W. Delaney

At Goranson Farm in Dresden, Maine (about 20 miles south of Augusta), farmer Rob Johanson revels in vegetables. He and his wife Jan have been planting 40 cash crops on the family farm for almost 40 years. You name it, they grow it: asparagus, artichokes, beet greens, garlic, herbs, leeks, lettuce, summer squash, and so on down the alphabet. But all was not well on this thriving 36-acre farm; crows were devastating Goranson Farm's sweet corn crop.

"They're cagey birds," Johanson said. "When the sweet corn is germinating and reaches 2 to 4 inches high, the crows yank it out of the ground and consume the remaining seed." They go up and down the rows of his six acres of corn, beginning at the end of April and continuing for nine weeks of successive plantings, catching the different maturities week after week.

"A flock of 100 seasonal crows can do immense damage in a short amount of time," Johanson says. And on a small farm, every crop is important. He counts on harvesting up to 1,000 dozen ears per acre.

The crows' destruction can put a

severe dent in productivity — an intolerable situation for a man who is serious about farming.

"We are stewards of the soil," Johanson said, "and this farm must support more than one generation." Unlike many mechanized, commercial farms, one third of Goranson Farm remains deliberately uncultivated each year. "It's bad for the soil if you don't rest it," Johanson contends. Overworking the soil destroys all the life. Loss of that texture reduces it to a medium in which you must dump chemicals, Johanson says. "So every crop produced at Goranson Farm is an essential crop.

## A "Natural" Solution

To scare the crows away, Johanson first used 12-inch balloons with some success. But the birds became accustomed to the sight. "We're too busy to keep moving the balloons," Johanson says, so the threat factor waned. Something else had to be done to supplement the balloons.



From trade journals, Johanson learned about the effectiveness of an electronic device which replicates birds' distress calls. The Super

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## Getting Birds to Fly the Coop

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BirdXPeller PRO is a programmable species-specific sonic repeller that operates on standard 110 volt electricity or via battery. Its directional speakers broadcast precise reproductions of birds' distress cries as recorded by a major U.S. university and create a perceived 'danger zone' that frightens infesting birds away in their own language. The choice of bird sounds are programmable depending on the infestation, and the choices include predator sounds to help scare all birds. With variable volume and time sequence controls, the unit fools the birds into fleeing the area, especially when used in conjunction with other deterrents, such as visual scare devices.

Johanson mounted the four-speaker unit on stakes and it worked immediately.

"The crows flew over, looked around, saw the balloons, and heard the recorded distress calls. They never landed. They related the distress calls to the presence of the threatening objects,"

he theorizes. The quality of the sound reproduction is convincing, he says, and the effectiveness has not diminished over time. "But," Johanson adds, "the battery died once, and the crows got back into the corn." He is considering using a solar panel to charge the battery so that can't happen again.

As president of the Maine Sustainable Agricultural Society, Rob Johanson is, by his own admission, a "live and let live" kind of guy. "Let the crows forage somewhere else," he concludes.

### Meanwhile, on a Larger Farm in Wisconsin ...

Bill Ingersoll agrees with Johanson: Let the destructive birds forage elsewhere. His farm in Concord, Wis. (between Madison and Milwaukee), covers 180 acres, and his family has been farming in the area for four generations.

"We have a great piece of ground dedicated to sweet corn," Ingersoll explains. The acreage has plenty of water via underground irrigation and backs up to a wooded area. "Birds love the environment," he says, and they

especially love his "confection" variety of sweet corn. "Confection" grows up through the top of the husk so it's easier for birds to do their damage. They peck at the tip," Ingersoll said.

While this nibbling does not destroy the remaining nine inches of the ear, it devastates the marketability of the sweet corn, he says. "When people pay retail, they want perfect corn. The visual appeal is as important to them as the taste. It's the reality of my marketplace," Ingersoll said.

The damage can happen overnight. "Just before dusk, huge flocks containing hundreds of birds swarm, including starlings, grackles, red-wing blackbirds and others. If they all land and peck the tip kernels, I lose money. I earn on average 20 cents to 25 cents per ear." There's much at stake here in profitability since Ingersoll's goal is to produce 35 acres of top-quality corn at 1,000 dozen ears per acre.

Ingersoll's solution to bird damage is similar to that of Johanson, although half a continent away. He began by using five owls mounted on 15-foot posts to scare the birds, plus one Birdscare banger LP device that delivers a cannon blast periodically. This combination frightened the birds away for the first two of three times, Ingersoll says, but then they became immune. So, like Johanson, added the Super BirdXPeller PRO's distress calls to the mix last year and that seems to have done the trick.

"We're sold on the XPeller," Ingersoll said. "When we went to harvest, we had very little damage. And I'm not taking any chances - I use all three methods. If I lose the crop, it will cost me far more than buying an XPeller. It has been cost-efficient for me."

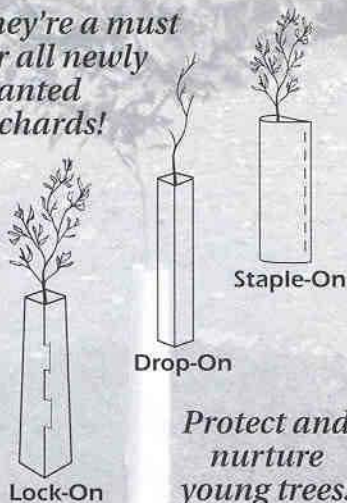
Ingersoll said that set up was easy, including programming the device for the different bird species. He mounted the speakers on posts about five feet high to make sure that the sound would project over the top of the corn and then changed the timing of the distress call a bit each day so the birds wouldn't become accustomed to the pattern, firing sounds every five to ten minutes.

Ingersoll says that over a three month period the device has been doing its job, so he can do his. □

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## Diamond Wins Awards

Grower cooperative Diamond of California recently took home several awards from the 1999 Cooperative Information Fair hosted by the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC).

Stockton-based Diamond of California won first place in the educational campaign category for its sales reference manual, second place in the employee publication category for a newsletter titled "Diamond Progress," and third place in the annual report category for its 1998 annual report.

"Diamond of California has a history of producing strong communications materials and continued its run this year," said Matt Lloyd, publications manager at NCFC. The Cooperative Information Fair has been conducted annually since 1946 to evaluate communications materials produced by NCFC member cooperatives. NCFC has nearly 100 members, including top cooperatives like Land O' Lakes, Sunkist Growers and Ocean Spray. □