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Birds of prey as pest bird deterrents in blueberries

Q. Which bird of prey species might be best at deterring starlings?

A. Both native and exotic (non-native) birds of prey of many species can easily capture and kill starlings. Of the native wild birds found living in the Pacific Northwest, the following are known to kill small birds (including starlings): merlin, American kestrel, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, Northern harrier, and peregrine falcon. Of these, the sharp-shinned, Cooper's and peregrine are probably most likely to actively kill other birds as their preferred prey.

Q. Are captive, trained birds of prey, flown by licensed falconers, potentially useful in starling control for blueberries?

A. Yes, any bird of prey in a field will likely deter starlings through its mere presence, particularly if it is flown frequently from pre-season to end of season. These could be native species such as peregrine falcons, or exotic species such as aplomado falcons.

Q. How effective might it be to use services of a licensed falconer in order to deter pest birds in blueberries?

A. Effectiveness of the bird will be directly parallel to effectiveness of the falconer's technique. Certainly this is a highly effective bird control method when done properly and focused on particular blueberry fields.

Q. What benefit is there to blueberry growers to encourage native, wild birds of prey through habitat enhancement, vs. using falconry?

A. The general values of having wild birds of prey frequenting an agricultural area include rodent control, insect control, bird control, enhanced decomposition of carcasses, esthetic value, and enhanced value to society at large. The encouragement of wild birds of prey should be seen as a wildlife conservation effort with long-term benefits to agriculture, and compatibility with the agricultural landscape. By contrast, falconry is a highly targeted deterrent in specific fields.

Q. How can native, wild birds of prey have their populations enhanced?

A. Riparian (streamside) vegetation zones with tall trees, snags, nest cavities, and foraging habitat (grassland) provide for many of the needs of birds of prey. Artificial enhancements such as perching poles (for hunting) and nest boxes can further aid these species.

Q. Which of the native species are amenable to nest box adoption?

A. Both merlins and American kestrels would be amenable, but due to the rarity of merlins, kestrels are the only species available to nestbox programs.

Q. How might American kestrels specifically aid blueberry growers?

A. Kestrels will kill small birds including starlings, although this is usually not their primary prey. They will also chase starlings away during nesting (April-July). Kestrels will focus on rodents and large insects, which can also be an aid to growers. Further study is needed to understand potential benefits, but it is likely that territoriality of adult kestrels during the nesting season, and playful "practice chases" of young kestrels fledging the nests (June-August), in which the kestrels chase everything in sight (much as kittens chase string), would tend to deter starlings.

Q. Should kestrel enhancement efforts be compared to falconry in terms of bird deterrent efficacy?

A. Not really, as falconry is a targeted, intensive approach, and kestrel enhancement is a low-input, long term wildlife conservation approach. The appeal of the latter is its low cost and general benefit to the biodiversity of the food chain of the region. Kestrel enhancement efforts offer potential public relations value as the public becomes involved in box monitoring and bird watching around the farm, but they are not a targeted, quick-fix effort for a specific field.