

Have nature reduce your bird problem

With a little handy work, natural predators can be encouraged to take residence on your dairy.

by Paul R. Biagiotti, D.V.M.



American kestrel
Falco sparverius

PIGEONS are flying rats,” aptly stated one of my veterinary school professors as he described the impact of pest birds on dairy herd health. Much to the chagrin of many dairymen, pigeons, starlings and English sparrows thrive on dairy farms due to the presence of abundant food and shelter. Not only can these non-native birds consume huge quantities of animal feed, but they can act as vectors to spread diseases such as salmonellosis.

Large flocks are a common sight in winter and spring, soiling feed alleys, mangers, calf buckets and the animals themselves. Commonly utilized methods of controlling these pest birds include shooting and strategic placement of poisoned bait (avicides).

A pair of pitfalls

Both have limitations. Shooting can be dangerous and is labor intensive with questionable results. Meanwhile, poison can affect non-target species such as songbirds, pets and other desirable wildlife. In addition, poisoned target birds can fly long distances from the point of consumption of the bait, dying in residential areas. With growing scrutiny of animal husbandry practices by the nonfarming public, these methods can be misunderstood and seem violent and unnatural.

Organic dairy production is becoming more popular. As with conventional dairies, pest birds and rodents can thrive on organic farms. Pigeons can be found year-round. Starlings and English sparrows are seasonally abundant. Voles and mice can thrive in barns and the surrounding pastures.

To be considered organic, producers operate under additional constraints. The use of poison baits such as “starlicides” or any rodenticide on organic premises is strictly prohibited. This can put operators in a quandary . . . how to control pest birds and rodents with organic methods?

I have frequently pondered this question for both my conventional and organic dairy clients. Fortunately for me one day, my wife, an avid naturalist, came to the rescue.

“Why not encourage kestrels to nest in the barns?” she suggested.

We encourage the presence of kestrels and barn owls on our farm by placing nesting boxes at strategic locations. Every year we produce several broods of barn owls and a couple fledglings of kestrels. “If placing nesting areas or birdboxes works at our farm,” she reasoned, “why not try placing them at dairies?”

A wide territory

The American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), or sparrow hawk, is a common raptor found throughout North America in diverse habitats. It consumes large quantities of sparrows (as one would assume from its name) and small rodents.

Unlike larger raptors such as red-tailed or broad-winged hawks, also common, which construct twiggy nests in trees and rock outcroppings, kestrels are cavity nesters. That makes it possible for farmers and wildlife enthusiasts to encourage the presence of kestrels around the farm by providing artificial nesting sites.

Barn owls (*Tyto alba*), which hunt at night, are also found throughout the U.S., although they can be locally rare. They exclusively catch and consume large numbers

of small rodents. Fortunately for dairymen, they are also cavity nesters and readily accept nesting boxes.

Brought it to the dairy farm

Early last spring, we conducted an experiment at one of my client’s farms. My wife manufactured a couple of kestrel nesting boxes out of inexpensive lumber. We donated the two boxes to the dairy. The farm manager placed one nesting box high up in the rafters of the farm’s two freestall barns.

In a matter of days, a male kestrel could be seen perching in the rafters near one of the boxes. Soon thereafter, he was accompanied by a female. The herdsman noted seeing them mate and for a while the hen was no longer seen.

Once, when I was 30 feet below performing a herd check, we were delighted to observe the male present a vole at the entrance to the box. He was feeding the female and growing brood. A month or so later, we were treated to the sight of five sparrow hawks, two parents plus three fledglings, noisily flying from one length of the barn to the other, kee-keeing all the way. There was not a pest bird to be seen.

Make your own boxes

Plans for constructing nesting boxes for both kestrels and barn owls are readily available online from the Audubon Society or state wildlife departments. These websites will also provide information as to proper placement of boxes. For example, kestrel boxes should ideally be 10 to 36 feet above the ground, with the opening facing away from the prevailing wind. Making kestrel and barn owl nesting boxes would be a nice, educational project for 4-H or other youth-livestock groups.

Barn owls, in our experience, do not immediately occupy a nesting box. It may take a year or two for the owls to discover and adopt a box. They may even temporarily use the box as a food cache, instead.

We once observed an owl visiting a newly constructed box every



WITHIN A MATTER OF DAYS, sparrow hawks, also known as American kestrels, took residence in the nesting box. As the sparrow hawk family grew, not one pest bird could be seen in the entire freestall barn.

night. To our surprise, when the box was opened for cleaning, it was half full of dead voles! On the advice of a wildlife expert, we waited patiently, and ultimately it was used for nesting. Much to the disadvantage of the local vole population, it currently produces several broods of owlets a season.

An additional negative aspect of the use of avicides and rodenticides is that while they may eliminate the current population of pests, they do not discourage reinfestation. Birds from neighboring farms will quickly reoccupy the niche that has been created by killing off the local population. The presence of kestrels and barn owls is an active deterrent to recolonization of vacated habitat. The “fear factor” they provide is an added bonus to attracting owls and raptors to your farm.

Whether you are a conventional or organic dairy producer, consider placing predatory bird nesting boxes around your dairy. You will be implementing a pest wildlife control method that is esthetically pleasant, natural, safe and ecologically sound. Encourage the presence on your farm of endemic predators such as sparrow hawks and barn owls. You stand to lose some mice and sparrows and gain some delightful pest control partners.



Barn owls
Tyto alba

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