

Why does VDOT feel European starlings are a problem on the Benjamin Harrison Bridge?

Thousands of European starlings perch atop the Benjamin Harrison Bridge each day, leaving behind droppings that have become both a health hazard to bridge workers and a costly cleanup project for VDOT. In fact, the \$9.1 million bridge renovation project currently underway to repaint the 41 year old structure involves the removal of large amounts of bird droppings—18 inches thick in some areas. The accumulation of bird feces not only creates unpleasant and unsanitary working conditions for bridge staff, but it also contributes to accelerated bridge deterioration.

What are European starlings?

European starlings are not native to North America. About 100 starlings were released in New York in the early 1890s and have expanded to become one of the most populous and dispersed species on the continent. These aggressive, cavity-nesting birds compete with native species. Their overabundant flocks can be a nuisance due to noise and excessive droppings, which may increase disease risks.

What is VDOT doing to reduce the accumulation of bird feces on the bridge?

Under the recommendation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services program, VDOT has agreed to permit USDA personnel to place controlled bait stations on the south end of the bridge in an effort to reduce the European starling population that roost on the bridge. The USDA will be using a federally-restricted pesticide, called [DRC-1339](#), to reinforce earlier non-lethal methods.

Aren't there non-lethal methods that could have been used first?

USDA's Wildlife Services uses an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management approach that employs the most humane, efficient and safe methods to implement an effective response to the damage issue. USDA has been working with VDOT to move the starlings away from the bridge using non-lethal dispersal methods since 2005. In fact, in [August 2008](#) under the guidance of the USDA, bridge tenders used pyrotechnic noise makers to scare the birds away from the bridge for several months. Other methods used were harassment with horns and structural repairs. All these methods provided only short-term relief.

How long will it take for the toxin to affect the birds?

The pesticide normally takes one to three days to affect the birds. They most often return to their roosting, loafing or feeding location before responding to the pesticide but can also seek cover in dense vegetation.

If an animal eats one of these birds, will it harm them?

Research suggests animals that ingest or play with a bird that has been exposed to this toxin will not be harmed. Pesticide that was not absorbed in the bird's body is metabolized and excreted within two hours after consumption. Therefore, the bird will have excreted all or most of the pesticide prior to its death. A cat, dog, owl or other predator would need to feed exclusively on a large amount of exposed birds for more than several months to be affected.

Starling Population Management

Benjamin Harrison Bridge (continued)

What should I do if I find a dead bird in my yard?

Any dead bird should be disposed of properly. USDA's Wildlife Service recommends using disposable gloves or a plastic bag to pick up any dead wildlife to avoid exposure to any disease or parasite. Carcasses should be placed in the trash. If large numbers of birds are found and you're uncomfortable with handling these birds, contact the USDA Wildlife Services office for assistance at 804-739-7739.

What is the USDA doing to prevent the toxin from getting into the river?

The pesticide is spread on bait in a location away from the water and any remaining pesticide is removed. DRC-1339 is unstable in the environment and degrades rapidly when exposed to sunlight, moisture or heat. The baiting program has been evaluated using the required National Environmental Policy Act's (NEPA) environmental impact statement process, which determined the baiting program will not have any long-term negative impacts on the environment.

What is the USDA doing to prevent other birds from eating the toxin?

Large European starling flocks will typically keep other birds away from their area, which was confirmed by USDA observations at the bridge during recent weeks. USDA personnel will observe the feeding during the treatment. If other birds enter the treatment area, the baiting can be discontinued until a time when only European starlings are present.

How long will this technique be used? Is there a plan to do this again later?

The pre-baiting will take place over several days to make sure the starlings are eating the bait and that other birds are not entering the treatment area. The treated bait is placed for a day and a certified pesticide applicator is present until all the bait is eaten or removed. If necessary, the treatment could be repeated again in a few weeks.

Who would I contact for more information?

U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service
Wildlife Services
1-866-4USDA-WS

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Environmental Division
804-524-6104
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