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LAX makes birds unwelcome

'Bullets on wings' can bring down planes, so keeping them away from runways is critical work.

August 23, 2009 | Dan Weikel

Most people know them as European starlings, stout little birds that weigh no more than 4 ounces. But around the nation's airports, they are called "bullets with wings."

Flocks of them brought down a Lockheed Electra during takeoff in Boston in 1960 and a Belgian Air Force C-130 Hercules cargo plane in the Netherlands in 1996. Combined, the crashes killed more than 100 people.

Starlings also fly in the crowded skies above Los Angeles International Airport, a major concern of biologist Todd Pitlik, who works for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. His job is to control the wildlife populations at LAX, where more than 940 animal strikes involving commercial aircraft were reported between 1990 and 2008. About 4% of the collisions caused substantial damage to engines, wings and fuselages.

Pitlik's work isn't easy. LAX's 3,500 acres just east of the Pacific Ocean contain a menagerie of birds and small mammals that inhabit the drainage ditches, trees, dunes and grassy flats that surround the four runways of the nation's third-busiest airport.

Red foxes dash across the tarmac. Kestrels hover along the final approaches. Sea gulls rummage for scraps of food while red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons dive for live prey. One year, young pelicans that had eaten toxic algae and fish were dropping on the runways.

"Wildlife situations can be unpredictable and potentially dangerous," said Pitlik, 46, who has worked at LAX since the late 1990s. "It is important to minimize the risk and liability, but it's also important to take care of the wildlife."

Pitlik is part of a USDA program that provided wildlife management services and training at more than 1,300 airports across the country last year. He is one of seven department biologists in California who work at military and civilian aviation facilities.

Under federal regulations, commercial airports are required to assess wildlife hazards and develop management plans to reduce the risk of mammal and bird strikes. The Federal Aviation Administration reviews the programs annually, said Ian Gregor, an FAA spokesman.

"This might be an issue the public became aware of only after US Airways Flight 1549 ditched in the Hudson River" in January, Gregor said. "But preventing bird strikes is something that the FAA and airports all over the country have been working hard at for years and years."

Nationally, there were 112,387 reports of aircraft striking birds, mammals and reptiles at 2,008 airports from 1990 to 2008, according the FAA. The collisions caused an estimated \$725 million in damage last year to commercial, military and private craft.

To deal with the problem at LAX, Pitlik has placed traps for birds in the open spaces, including 6-foot-high metal cages that capture starlings.

Wood and screen boxes with collapsible roofs catch kestrels, hawks and falcons. For bait, he uses pet food and live pigeons in enclosures that shield them from injury. Traps for mammals, including raccoons, rabbits, foxes and feral cats, are set as needed; most are euthanized.

To scare birds and animals away from busy taxiways and runways, Pitlik regularly uses a small pistol that shoots noisy firecrackers into the air. They either explode with a bang or make a whistling or screaming sound.

Pitlik's management plan includes the removal of habitat and food sources that attract wildlife to airport grounds. Grassy fields and other vegetation are cut back to remove cover and nesting areas. Vector control is called in occasionally to eliminate rodents and insects hunted by birds of prey.

Red-tailed hawks can be a threat to aircraft because they weigh 2 to 4 pounds, have large wing spans and can carry almost their weight in food. Kestrels, the smallest and most common falcon in North America, are a lesser danger, but they have one of the highest casualty rates at LAX, especially in June and July when they teach their young to hunt. The technique involves hovering over their prey at altitudes of up to 65 feet. They also can become alarmed and fly directly into aircraft.

"They get in the wrong place at the wrong time," Pitlik said. "They even get killed by the jet wash" -- turbulence stirred by planes powering up to taxi or take off.

Pitlik has combined his fieldwork with a community outreach program to reduce the presence of birds at restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, catering services and other businesses in and around the airport.

They are advised to remove trash promptly, cover garbage cans, trim vegetation, monitor roof tops and install netting or spikes to deter birds from roosting or nesting.

Though wildlife is plentiful in the area, LAX has a lower risk of animal strikes than some other airports because it is not situated along the migration paths of larger mammals or game birds, such as deer or the Canada geese that brought down the US Airways flight in New York City.

"We have some larger birds, like red-tail hawks or the occasional egret and great blue heron," Pitlik said.

"But their numbers and occurrences are not as great as large birds in the Midwest and Northeast. Because of our location, we tend to dodge the bullet a little more."

Since 2000, the list of airports with the greatest number of serious incidents has been led by New York's John F. Kennedy International with 30 and Sacramento International with 28. Los Angeles was tied for ninth place with 16, including two emergency landings by airliners with engines damaged by bird strikes.

Last month, Pitlik estimated, he captured 350 starlings, 70 sparrows and pigeons, up to six red-tailed and Cooper's hawks, and several mammals.

He turns the hawks and falcons over to South Bay Wildlife Rehab, a nonprofit organization on the Palos Verdes Peninsula that cares for orphaned and injured birds and mammals.

The starlings and other small birds are killed and fed to the animals under the organization's care.

South Bay Wildlife monitors the hawks and falcons to make sure they are healthy before moving them at least 200 miles from LAX, making it difficult for them to return.

Ann Lynch, the founder and director, says her organization has handled almost 40 hawks and falcons captured at LAX, LA/Ontario International and Van Nuys Airport.

"South Bay Wildlife helps me do my job," Pitlik said.

"Getting the raptors out of the LAX environment allows them to continue to thrive. It is a great service to me and the airport."

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

The medium-sized black songbird has short, triangular wings, spotted plumage and a short tail.

* Found in practically all human habitats.

* Forages in open areas such as lawns and agricultural fields, walking and probing the soil with their bills.

* Forms flocks year-round.

* Will mob predators in flight, gathering into tight flocks and diving at them.

* Eats invertebrates, berries, fruit, grains and seeds.

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Source: www.birdweb.org