

A recent Sacramento Bee article described the extent of the pigeon problem in our area. It is reprinted below:

Unwelcome guests: Pigeons encouraged to fly away

By Sandy Louey -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published May 27, 2004*)

If it weren't for the installation of a satellite dish, Jim DeMarco would never have known that a serious problem had come to roost in the attic of his new home in Davis. "They were flapping me in the face," he said.

In nooks, crannies and eaves of newer houses throughout the Sacramento area, pigeons by the thousands are taking up residence.

The birds are attracted by tile roofs and the hidden coves created by the oddly angled roof lines so common today. Naturalists say the construction mimics the hollows of rocky cliffs that are the pigeons' natural stamping grounds.

But what's fine for Mother Nature isn't so fine for a 2,500-square-foot split level. Pigeons and the droppings they leave behind by the bucketful can cause serious damage, eventually destroying roofs, ruining paint and siding and spreading disease.

The result is a tiring - and often expensive - battle pitting suburban dwellers against an ancient bird often referred to as a "flying rat."

Homeowners shoot at them with paintball and BB guns. They sprawl rubber snakes across tiles and perch big plastic owls on rooftops in hopes that the menacing stares will frighten them off. The birds are not easily fooled.

"Pigeons poop on the owl," said Simone Ackermann, a biologist for Falcon Services, a Martinez-based firm that specializes in controlling birds and bats. "It's a laugh for them."

But not for homeowners, who can shell out more than a \$1,000 for the netting, spikes and other devices that professionals like Ackermann use to remove the birds and keep them out.

After finding pigeons in his attic, DeMarco spent \$700 to get - and keep them - out.

Of course, pigeons are familiar sights in cities - in parks and on sidewalks, tucked into the high-rise niches of commercial buildings and bridges. But now they're flocking to where homebuyers are going - suburbs like Roseville, Fair Oaks, Elk Grove and Davis.

In addition to attractions such as ample shelter and home design, nearby open fields often provide plenty of food for pigeons, who feed on everything from seeds to garbage.

"It happens the minute you've moved in," said Peter Lee, who lives in Elk Grove. "It's like having a rat infestation. They keep growing."

Pigeons, among the most common bird pests, are nonmigratory birds that breed year-round, said Patrick Smith, a staff wildlife biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services.

"There's some people that like them. There's some people that hate them. There's no in-between," Smith said. "They leave a mess, and they're dirty." Even some bird lovers aren't too fond of them.

"They're a nuisance," said Tim Fitzer, a board member of the Sacramento Audubon Society.

The constant cooing of birds on the roof can drive some crazy. But what clearly upsets most people are the droppings left behind. "It leaves a stain," Ackermann said. "It stays on the tile."

By the time Vince Davis, owner of Bird & Bat Control Specialists in Elk Grove, gets a call, the average roof has five to 10 gallons of pigeon droppings on it. The droppings are acidic and over time can cause serious damage.

Davis has seen as many as 150 birds gathered on a housetop at once, with up to 30 actually setting up home under the eaves.

Many homeowners try to get rid of the birds themselves, but most don't realize that ultrasound devices and phony scary animals don't work.

Davis said one Elk Grove homeowner tied a 5-foot rubber snake to a rope and regularly pulled it from one side of his roof to the other to scare off pigeons. After two years, he'd had enough. It cost him \$1,000 to have the pigeon-proofing professionally done.

Another shoved a basketball into an area where birds had nested. It worked - but it probably wasn't the look the owner wanted for the \$300,000 home.

One homeowner waited so long to call that his entire rooftop was a blanket of white droppings, Davis said.

Smith of USDA's Wildlife Services said combating pigeons usually takes a mix of measures, some of which can be done by the homeowner, some requiring professional help. One place to start: Don't feed the birds or leave garbage out. "There's not one magic wand to make the problem go away," Smith said.

Davis, Ackermann and other professionals use several methods to attack the problem, installing netting, stainless steel spikes and solar-powered "shock" strips that give the pigeons a slight electrical jolt.

Feral pigeons aren't a protected species, but poison isn't recommended because of the potential exposure of people and pets, Ackermann said. Neither is shooting the birds with paintballs or BB guns in urban and suburban areas.

At Pat Holland's Elk Grove home, pigeons roosted in the skylights. She paid Falcon Services \$1,600 to install spikes and netting. "They would nestle under and into the side, and do their business," she said. "It was awful. It was running down the walls."

Mary Koh was pigeon-savvy when she went looking for a home about two years ago. Her family already had paid to have netting installed on their previous residence, so one reason Koh chose her Elk Grove house was because it didn't appear to have the recessed areas that the birds find attractive. It didn't matter. The pigeons came anyway. Koh paid Bird & Bat \$650 to install spikes.

The birds don't roost there anymore - but they still like to hang out on top of Koh's roof. "It's impossible," she said. "They find their way."

And they'll keep finding their way because so many new homes are sprouting up, providing abundant nesting places for them. "They'll continue to populate as long as there's living spaces for them," Davis said. "We've built so many of their nesting areas."