

Bird Proof Gel: Pittsburg Municipal Airport

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Running an airport requires a multitude of management skills, including some nontraditional ones. The airport manager deals with people, planes and—sometimes—pests.

Gary Iori, Manager of Pittsburg Municipal Airport in Pittsburg, Kansas, knows all about it. Iori, who began flying at the tender age of 18, has been managing the Pittsburg airport for 20 years. Over the years, one of his most persistent management problems has been fighting the infiltration of starlings.

"They're nasty birds," he says. "Starlings crawl right into the engine intake and make a nest on top of the engine. They make a mess all over the wiring and the engine, often causing mechanical problems—to the point that the engine can catch fire."

This is serious business for any airport. The city-owned Pittsburg Municipal Airport consists of three runways and several buildings, including three structures that house 26 T-hangars each.

Iori saw flames erupt one day at the airport when a maintenance crew member started up a plane and taxied to the hangar. A starling had built a nest in the engine, and the nest caught fire. The plane was on the ground at the time, but Iori well knows it could easily have been in the air. He worries about incoming air traffic.

"It seems that the propeller barely stops and the starlings start crawling in. If a plane sits just two or three hours, there can be a nest built in it." To prevent it, he plugs the engine intake with foam rubber. "Springtime and early summer are the worst," he adds, "when the birds are looking to nest, starlings will come in any opening in the hangars." This is bad news for airplane owners. "Forty planes are based here, from corporate jets to two-passenger trainers," he notes.

"We've had the problem here since The Year One," Iori says, referring to the year he took over as airport manager 20 years ago. "A guy who pays \$150 a month to park his plane doesn't want to see bird mess on it. Acidic droppings fade the paint," he says. "And birds carry disease, germs, mites and lice," Iori adds.

Besides being unsightly, droppings can pose a major health hazard. Bird droppings often harbor fungi that can cause serious—even fatal—lung diseases (namely, histoplasmosis and cryptococcosis) when the spores are transmitted to humans who may breathe in the harmful fecal dust.

Iori ultimately outwitted the birds with a product called Bird-Proof Gel...but not before he tried the full arsenal of other deterrents.

"We tried a plastic owl, rubber snakes, flashing lights and sonic beepers," Iori reports. "But birds get used to anything." He even put weed poison on nearby foliage, but the birds didn't feed there. He shot bird-shot at them. It's harmless at a distance, he points out. "The birds always came back as soon as I left."

Finally, he saw an advertisement for Bird-Proof Gel in an aviation magazine. Bird-Proof Gel is a highly effective bird-deterrent gel made by Bird-X, Inc. in Chicago. It is a transparent gel that repels bird pests from their normal roosting areas. When applied on ledges, beams, rafters, cornices, ornamental copings and similar favorite "landing sites," the gel compound discourages birds from alighting and nesting—for a year or more, even under most extreme weather conditions. Bird-Proof Gel has a tacky feeling that birds shun; yet it's harmless, odorless, nonpoisonous and environmentally safe. It's easy to apply with any standard caulking gun. Bird-Proof Gel is also available in liquid form for easy spraying on trees and over other large surfaces and less accessible areas.

Reading about Bird-Proof Gel reminded Iori of the sticky substances he'd seen used around the base of trees to keep pests from climbing up the trunks. It sounded like a plausible solution, and Iori decided to order a case.

"I spread Bird-Proof Gel around one T-hangar with a caulking gun," Iori explains. After he applied it—Presto! "In a couple of days, the birds were out of there," he attests. And out of there for good. "They left and didn't come back. I applied it two years ago and again this year." He explains how he watched where the birds went in and applied Bird-Proof Gel to all vulnerable openings, particularly "the top of sliding doors, where the slot is."

He's convinced that the starlings are not coming back. Unlike other bird-scaring devices, "they can't get accustomed to Bird-Proof because it gets on them." Every time the birds get near the gel, "it sticks to their wings and feet. It's a sticky nuisance, but not poisonous. It physically agitates them."

Before Bird-Proof Gel, says Iori, "the situation was frustrating to pilots, and to me. Some of these airplanes cost up to \$600,000 and they cost \$8,000 to \$10,000 to repaint." Here were the owners, paying the municipal airport to keep their planes out of harm's way, while the starlings were making a grand mess of things and potentially endangering lives if a nest caught on fire in the air.

"I've heard of it happening in the air, and I've seen it happen here on the ground." It's a scary thought, which is why Iori goes to the trouble of plugging engine intakes with foam rubber and getting rid of birds in the T-hangars and exerting bird damage control wherever possible. "Aluminum is very susceptible to corrosion. Droppings can erode the T-hangar structures, and the birds can also get into openings in the fuselage where the rudder is."

While the infiltration of birds was professionally frustrating, Iori says it was also "personally aggravating." His own plane, a Cessna 182 that he co-owns with three other pilots, is among those housed at Pittsburgh Municipal Airport. Getting rid of the birds significantly "improved relationships with airport users," Iori says. All the pilots with planes in the T-hangars noticed the difference and they don't miss the starlings one bit.