

Airport Defends its Territory with Bird Spikes

There's no delicate way to put this: Bird excrement on runway lights is hideous and hazardous. From a pilot safety standpoint alone, the filthy white film covering the face of lights and directional signs along our taxiways and runway was unacceptable.

The bird poop was obstructing and obscuring the lights, creating a safety hazard at our 1,000-acre airport. San Bernardino International Airport inherited the problem in 1994, when it took over the facility, a former military base. A mixed bag of birds, including hawks and smaller species, sat on top of the globe-like lights with their tails hanging over the front of the lights, and did what comes naturally, Ray describes.

"We were expending about 200 man-hours per year to clean up the bird mess," Ray continues. And the airport maintenance crew had to clean not only the runway and taxiway lights, but also the airport's directional signs that guide pilots along proper routes before take-off and after landing. The big black and yellow directional signs were streaked and defaced by the bird droppings.

Flatlands and Lookout Posts

Why were the offending birds so fond of sitting on the airport lights and signs? Ray thinks he understands why. Airports are usually flat. San Bernardino's airport definitely is, and it covers a sprawling expanse of 1,000 acres. For birds to gain any competitive advantage, they need to be elevated so they can spot their prey or enemies.

"Lights and signs are the obvious perches above this flat land," Ray says. Even an elevation as small as the height of a runway light is better than nothing for birds to see what's what on the vast terrain. It was not going to be easy to dissuade the unwelcome "roosters" to give up their favorite lookouts.

"The minute I saw the ad, I thought, 'Someone finally marketed exactly what we need.' The spikes have wide, angled branches like a Christmas tree to deter birds," he says. Made of heavy-duty transparent plastic, the spikes are almost invisible and maintenance-free. They can't rust. The density of the configuration of the plastic spikes creates an impenetrable barrier against birds. Best of all, according to Ray, they do the job.

"They worked right away," he says, just as soon as his maintenance crew could install the Spikes directly on the airport lights and signs. "Birds can't land where the Spikes are, and it's hard for birds to lean up against the Spikes and squeeze their way onto the lights," Ray says. "It has greatly reduced the problem." And, he adds, Spikes do not affect the functional operation of the lights at all. They do not interfere with the electrical wiring or connections in any way, nor with the normal electrical maintenance procedures for the lights.

Ray notes that on the airport's largest directional signs, which can be as wide as ten feet, the maintenance crew added screws to supplement the glue for extra insurance in case of high winds.

All of San Bernardino International Airport's 700 taxiway and runway light fixtures and 54 guidance signs are outfitted with strips of spikes, and Ray has ready advice for others with bird problems at airports or on electrical fixtures. "Before resorting to big-time noise canisters or ultrasonic devices, try spikes." It's a simpler and less expensive solution that has saved San Bernardino Airport Authority 200 man-hours a year in cleanup costs.

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