

Why is that Bird Attacking my Window?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This is the time of year that I start to receive phone calls and questions as to why a bird is attacking the window of someone's home. Or it could be the mirror of a vehicle parked outside. In fact, it may be almost any object shiny enough that a bird can see its reflection. It may even be a woodpecker hammering away on a metal chimney, gutter or downspout or a dead tree. While each of these may be somewhat different, they all come down to two things, hormones and the breeding season!

While some birds are colonial, like Purple Martins or Great Blue Herons, many species defend territories. The size of the territory has a lot to do with food availability. As the birds head into the breeding season they want to make sure that there will be enough food available to raise their young. In locations or years when there is abundant food, the territory may be smaller than in locations or years when food is more scarce.

Often it is the male that declares the territory, with its singing, but the male and female may both defend the territory. If they happen to see their reflection in a window or anything shiny, they will assume that it is another bird invading their territory and will go to great, at times excessive, lengths to drive them away. This can result with them routinely flying at the window. This needs to be differentiated from a bird just flying into the window. If they are defending territory they will often hover in front of the window, peck at the window or even lash out with their feet at the window. They will also keep coming back day after day after day.

Northern Cardinals are one of the worst at this but I've seen several wren species do this as well. One of the reasons that Northern Cardinals may be more prone to this is because they often nest in bushes and shrubs very near our homes. Simply going out and trying to "shoo" them away will work for as long as you are out there. To truly stop them you often need to cover the window with newspaper or cardboard or anything non-reflective. Putting up decals or anything on the inside will not work - it needs to be on the outside. The other option is to put up screening or netting close to the outside of the window to help break up the reflection. And sometimes, no matter what you do, the bird will seek out another window and continue to attack the interloper!

The other bird annoyance I hear about every spring is the drumming woodpecker. All woodpecker species do this. They try to find something as resonantly loud as possible. Sometimes it's a hollow tree branch. Maybe a metal chimney stove pipe. Or maybe it's the metal guttering right outside your bedroom window. When woodpeckers are excavating a tree branch either for a nest or in search of food it is a slow and very deliberate tap, tap, tap. Often at uneven intervals. When they drum, it is machine gun fast and if it is on the gutter outside your bedroom window it will sit you straight up in bed. Trust me! This is the way that a male woodpecker announces his territory and how he also shows off to the female that he may be a good mate. While all woodpecker species will do this, it's usually not for very long in the spring.

A couple of things homeowners need to keep in mind. All bird species in Kansas with the exception of the House Sparrow, the pigeon and the starling, are protected by federal law. It is illegal to kill them and once their nest has eggs or young in it, the nest is protected as well. Before the get eggs laid or after the young are gone you can tear the nest down, but not in between. So you may not like that Barn Swallow with their nest over your front door, but until the young are fledged, you're stuck with it!