

SCARECROW

BIO-ACOUSTIC SYSTEMS

An update from Nigel Horton of NH Bird Management

March 2005

Is it a novelty effect? Are birds dispersing in response to a noise they have not heard before? Time will tell.

I am often asked about how we develop our distress calls, so I thought this may be of interest.

Thanks to Central Science Laboratory's continuing Canada Goose round-ups in the Heathrow area, another set of candidate calls was obtained and edited at the studio. The result is that NH Bird Management now has two Patrols full of adult and gosling calls that were produced when the birds were handled.

In fact the above is proving to be the easy bit; field testing of these calls is a real problem. Yes, I can find many geese on the River Thames where they are regularly fed by humans and on the banks of ponds but if I try and disperse these, they hop from the bank onto the water and on the river, float off downstream. The response is probably as a result of a loud novel noise and I can get the same effect using a 1950s wooden football rattle. In those situations where the birds are a long way from water, dispersal appears to last all day and repeat operations are at a frequency of 1/day and I am still unsure whether what I see is a response to a distress call or, again, merely a novel experience.

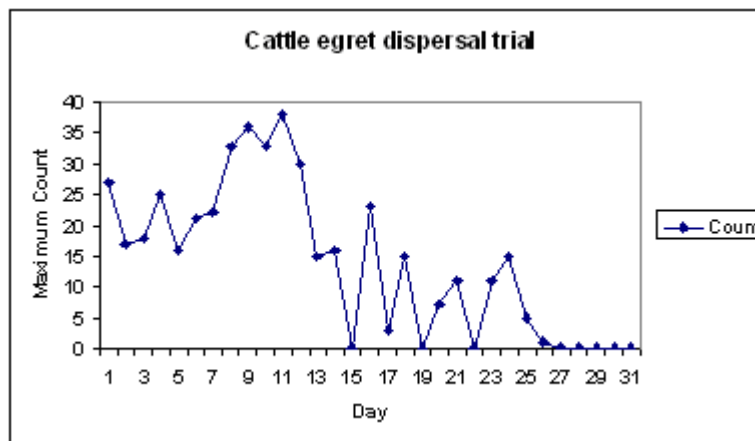
The testing continues but if you know of a regular presence of a number of Canada Geese away from water please let SCARECROW know.

The Canada Goose research links nicely to recent correspondence on the dispersal of flocks of cattle egrets in the Far East.

You may remember a Newsletter article I wrote a few years ago about my experiences when I used the rook distress call against cattle egrets on an airfield in Singapore and at a skinning yard in India. At the latter, the main species I was trying to disperse were house crows. There has now been a trial at an aerodrome where egrets were feeding on insects about 300m into the undershoot and about 200m off the centreline. The rook call has been used supplemented occasionally by the waving of a white cloth and the birds have been successfully dispersed throughout the trial period of about a month. Unlike with Canada Geese, the egrets tried to return after a fairly short time but responded to further broadcasts of the rook call. Why does the rook distress call disperse cattle egrets? There may be a small prize for the most original or right answer.

Control observations were made on the first five days and, interestingly, numbers steadily increased during the first week when rook distress calls were broadcast. Numbers reduced

over the next 2 weeks so much so that none were seen during the final five days of the trial (see graph below).



It is still unclear why the rook distress call repels cattle egrets, especially from an attractive feeding site but it is unlikely to be due to a novelty effect. When birds habituate to a harmless noise, it is usually within a maximum of a few days. For example, woodpigeons will fly off when a gas cannon is turned on but 2 – 3 days later, even those birds feeding close to the cannon ignore the random and harmless bangs produced.

Many thanks.

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