

BLACKBIRDS

Sunflowers seeds are particularly vulnerable to predation by blackbirds due to the high nutritional value, easy accessibility, and heads serving as a perch during feeding. Blackbird nests are built in dense vegetation, most often cattails. After nesting, blackbirds form large flocks and begin feeding in grain fields and for this reason, extensive feeding damage often occurs near cattail marches. Feeding begins soon after petal drop and most of the damage occurs during the following three weeks. Peak concentrations of blackbirds occur in mid-September, coinciding with the crop reaching physiological maturity.



CONTROL

A combination of cultural practices may be useful in reducing the risk of bird predation on sunflower. If possible, sunflowers should not be planted near cattail marshes or woodlots. Planting at the same time as neighbors reduces damage since blackbirds are attracted to the early maturing fields. Insect and weed control will reduce the pre-season food source for blackbirds before the crop reaches a susceptible stage for feeding. Delaying cultivation or harrowing of crop stubble in neighboring fields increases alternate feeding area for harassed birds and other wildlife. Desiccation to advance harvest and getting the crop harvested as soon as possible reduces exposure.

Managing cattails reduces nesting sites; however, no herbicides to control cattails are registered in Canada. Decoy cropping is an option to detract blackbirds from high value confectionary and oilseed varieties. Decoy crops may include small plots of oilseed sunflower or other desirable crops planted near traditional wetland and tree roost sites. Scare methods to frighten birds away from the vicinity have achieved different levels of success.

