

Acridotheres tristis

The Common Myna – “The Farmers Friend”

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The Common (or Indian) Myna is listed today as the third worst invasive species of the world by the Global Invasive Species Database. It is native from India and western Southeast Asia, but has been introduced to every continent to help control insect pests as a natural insecticide. Why has this noisy, little bird become such a concern for Australia? And what can, and is being done to evict the problem?

General info

The Common Myna is an omnivorous tropical bird species from the Starling (Sturnidae) family, order Passeriformes. It is about 25 cm tall, brown, with a black head and distinctive yellow/orange feet, beak and eye skin. The wings have clear white patches, which are visible in flight. The male and female are similar in appearance, and they are known to choose their mate for life.



Their voice is known to be rather unpleasant and noisy combining a potpourri of growls, gurgling, raucous, clicks, whistling and chattering. Despite this, its ability to mimic human speech has made it popular as a cage bird.

As a scavenger living in farmland, open woodland, savannah and close to human settlement, it is known to have a very mixed diet comprising fruits, invertebrates, eggs, lizards, young fowls, domestic animal fodder and scrapings from waste bins. This species is also peculiar in the fact that instead of hopping, they walk when roaming the ground.

The problem

Because of its fondness of insects, this passerine was introduced Eastern Australia in 1862 to benefit the farming industry by evicting the unprofitable fruit- and crop eating plagues. In Canberra alone, 110 mynas were released between 1968 and 1971. It was rapidly spread over the next decades, and in the middle of the 20th century the birds had made feral communities over great parts of Oceania. This wasn't quite the success the farmers hoped for, because the birds also inflicted damage to the farming crops, making the presumed economic gain a minimum.



The Myna has become a nuisance to the human population, making their nests in roofs and holes in buildings and houses (e.g. chimneys). Commonly it appears in roosts causing great

noise at night (Listen here: http://sres.anu.edu.au/associated/myna/identification_files/roost.au). It is branded as a rude, intelligent and very adaptable bird; in urban areas it has learned to snap food out of peoples hands. On behalf of this, the fear of transmittable diseases to both human and livestock is grave. Epidemics like the very current avian flue, SARS, bird malaria and other dangerous viruses and parasites can fast and easily be distributed by this bold bird.

One of the main concerns of the growing population is the damaging effect on biological diversity; threatening endemic bird and mammal species by aggressively competing for nesting hollows. Pell and Tidemann's research article has shown the mynas potential to do just this. The endangered birds outlined in the research article are the Crimson rosella (*Platycercus elegans*), Eastern rosella (*Platycercus eximius*) and the Red-rumped parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*) – all habitants in both Red Hill Nature Park and Oakey Hill Nature Park in Canberra, Australia. In their research they proved that the Mynas really do cause problems for these parrots and if nothing is done, they probably face extinction.

What can and is being done?

Mitigation of the previous mentioned problems is listed as a high priority in Australia today. Different methods of evicting the birds have been discussed and tested. Poisoning and shooting of small groups has been practiced, but can be dangerous to non-target species and humans. Introduction of pathogens and parasites as biological control, and fertility control (to induce sterility amongst the birds) has been rejected for the same reasons, as well as for the development of such pathogens being too expensive. Restriction of food supply and dispersal of traps have also gone through trials and evaluation.

Amid the possibilities listed, the use of traps with euthanasia system has been acknowledged as the most humane by animal welfare authorities. There are nest-box traps and valve traps (picture) that are made selective to myna (and some starling species) by having special entrance valves that are only accessible by birds that walk instead of hop. When the birds are caught, a lethal concentration of CO₂-gas is let into the sealed cage. This technique has shown to be successful and approved, although it catches only a few birds at a time, and is effective just in breeding season.



Conclusion

It is no wonder that the Common Myna is listed as one of the world's worst invasive species. The grave threat on biodiversity and high risk of transmitting diseases classifies it as an extreme pest. The efforts put on trapping methods to decrease and restrain the number of birds, gives at the moment the best potential to solve this problem. Both local and federal groups and authorities are doing what they can to better the situation as fast as possible.

References:

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