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Front Page

ENVIRONMENT

'Birds, aircraft don't mix'

BWI wildlife control efforts aimed at preventing accidents

By MARC SHAPIRO Staff Writer

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Jeremy Smith stands in a field off of Mathison Way, right outside of the midfield cargo area at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport, with a gun in his hand.

He fires a 15 mm red cartridge, a "banger," from his cap pistol and it flies about 200 feet into the field. It explodes with a flash of light for two seconds.

"It sounds like a gunshot," he said.

He fires another cartridge, a



J. Henson — The Capital

Jeremy Smith sends an exploding device skyward in a field near a runway at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport. The loud report of the device scares birds and makes the flocks move elsewhere.

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yellow one called a "screamer." It also flies 200 feet, but it leaves a trail of smoke and whistles like a bottle rocket along the way.

Mr. Smith is a U.S. Department of Agriculture wildlife biologist demonstrating two ways he scares birds and other animals away from BWI Airport.

His ultimate goal is to prevent bird strikes, which is when birds collide with airplanes.



A U.S. Airways flight landed in the Hudson River in New York City on Jan. 15 when both of its engines were disabled. The incident is being investigated as a double bird strike.

"Birds and aircraft don't mix," said Jonathan Dean, a BWI spokesman. "Bird strikes happen at airports around the world.

Very rarely is the result that devastating."

The first bird strike on record happened to airplane inventors Orville and Wilbur Wright, Mr. Smith said. While reports have conflicted over the years, the most recent account is that a gull was lodged in the steering component, he said.



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"It's been an age-old challenge, sharing the skies," he said.

From 1990 to 2007, more than 82,000 airstrikes were reported to the Federal Aviation Administration, according to an administration report released in June. There were 58,585 strikes on commercial airlines. Birds were involved in 97.5 percent of the reported strikes. Eight strikes resulted in 11 human deaths.

BWI sees starlings and Canada geese most often, Mr. Smith said. Hawks pop up sometimes as well.

White-tailed deer are the most common land mammal found at BWI and occasionally foxes and groundhogs are present, Mr. Smith said.

In Maryland, there were 954 airstrikes during that 18-year period, 890 of which were by birds. That number includes all of Maryland's airports.

The report, which had a section about significant bird strikes, did not mention specific incidents at BWI. Officials at the FAA could not be reached for comment for more current information.

In addition to the cap pistol that Mr. Smith uses, BWI has 12 air cannons around the airfield that are used primarily when air traffic is busy. Sometimes Mr. Smith employs these devices daily, and sometimes they go unused for a month.

The solar-powered air cannons use propane gas to make shotgun-like noises much like the banger. The cannons, which can be activated manually, remotely or from the airport's command center, spin around and fire intermittently for about three minutes. They are best for scaring birds from a distance, Mr. Smith said.

In addition to these harassment tactics, the airport works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Maryland Aviation Administration's Office of Environmental Planning to landscape and plant vegetation that doesn't create attractive habitats for

animals.

The airport's stormwater management systems aim to minimize open standing water. The state Aviation Administration uses ponds with very steep slopes that drain in 24 to 48 hours, Mr. Smith said. In areas where that is not possible, a bird grid, which is wire arranged in a grid-like pattern over the standing water, is installed.

In 1999, the FAA found ducks in a pond adjacent to a runway at BWI and cut off all funding until something was done about it.

Landscape specifications include that no fruits, nuts or berries be planted, because they attract fowl, Mr. Dean said. The state Aviation Administration has a preferred list of plant species and landscaping guidelines that it shares with Anne Arundel County, since BWI's airport zoning district encompasses a four-mile radius from the center of the airfield.

The FAA actually recommends five miles, according to state aviation administration documents.

The airport is also testing 27,150 square feet of artificial turf near an intersection of two runways. Since it does not attract wildlife and does not need cutting, the airport could install more depending on cost and effectiveness, Mr. Dean said.

Mr. Smith, who patrols the airfields daily, said things have been calm.

"Nothing too interesting lately," he said. "We're pretty fortunate that things have been on autopilot."

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