

BLACKBIRDS

Sunflower 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 to reduce the risk of blackbird predation on sunflowers. Such practices include:

- Plant at the same time as neighbors – blackbirds are attracted to early maturing sunflowers.
- Do not plant sunflowers near cattail marshes or woodlots - cattail choked sloughs serve as the roosting sites for blackbirds.
- Delayed cultivation of crop stubble increases alternate feeding areas to prevent predation on neighboring sunflower fields.
- Desiccate to advance harvest and reduce the exposure time to blackbirds.
- Decoy cropping to attract blackbirds away from high value confectionary and oilseed varieties.
- Employ scare methods to frighten blackbirds away. Cannons are available from your local Conservation office.
- Cut cattails where viable using a mower or a cattail harvester.

Figure 54. Cattails serve as the roosting sites for blackbirds.

