

POLICE BATTLE BIRDS FOR DECADES

By Ellen Knight

Over the years, Winchester police have had to deal with runaway horses, wandering goats, loose pigs running through the town center, dogs in all manner of trouble, and the occasional alligator, snake, bat, and nest of wasps. For decades during the early 20th century, the police waged an annual war on the west side against obnoxious flocks of birds.

In 1928, it was not the ordinary problem of a cat stuck up a tree that vexed firemen that August, but rather too many birds in the trees. Residents of Wedgemere Avenue complained that large flocks of black birds roosting in the trees lining the roadway had been making themselves obnoxious in many ways to those living in the vicinity.

The Board of Selectmen had had its own bird problem earlier that year—pigeons. Their use of the Town Hall tower for their own domestic purposes since 1887 had added steadily increasing stress to the floor timbers.

The solution then was excavation and wire netting. But finding a solution for Wedgemere Avenue was not so simple. Feeling it was not in their purview, the police managed, that first year, to turn the problem over to the Fire Department.

“It was learned from one who had special knowledge of the modus operandi of starlings that the birds if driven from their roosting places three nights running would become sufficiently aware of their general unpopularity to betake themselves elsewhere,” *The Winchester Star* reported. Deputy Chief John J. Gorman and three men set off to remove the birds and, once at the scene, went into a huddle.

“The Deputy Chief was of the opinion that the surest way to obtain results lay in a surprise attack and strongly advised sneaking up upon the birds’ blind side. Driver John J. Flaherty concurred with this judgement while hoseman Alexander MaKenzie favored going out into the open at once and giving the starlings notice of the impending attack. After some discussion the latter notion was discarded and the firemen proceeded to stalk their prey.

“Coupling their hoses to a nearby hydrant the men advanced cautiously upon the trees in which the starlings were ensconced and arriving at a strategic position rained their streams of water upon the uppermost branches. They got results. The birds were awakened and rudely reminded that they were in a civilized community. We do not mean to imply that the starlings quit without a struggle. They shifted their base



*John J. Gorman,
c. 1918*

about from tree to tree. But the firemen were adamant and in the end won at least a moral victory.”¹

The procedure was followed for two more evenings. One night included a barrage of Roman candles, left over from July 4, reportedly very effective. At any rate, the *Star* had no follow-up reports that summer.

BIRDS RETURN

But the victory was not permanent. A year later, the birds were back, again making nuisances of themselves.

Complaints were made to the Board of Selectmen, which again had another bird problem of its own—chickens. Under state statute, if chickens were killed or damaged by dogs, an inspector had to determine their value to recompense the owner from the dog tax fund. In 1929, the chairman of the Board (Joseph W. Worthen) discovered that he was ex-officio the Chicken Inspector.

One case arose. “In the fulfillment of this duty the present Chairman, untrained and inexperienced in the premises, has not been a success,” he confessed in the Annual Report. “A few of the chickens seemed to resent the methods which he used to determine their value, but most of them did not, because they were dead.”

Not having training or experience with starlings either, the Board communicated with the state Departments of Agriculture. Its first suggestion was to shoot Roman candles among the branches at night, which was tried again, with no success. The second suggestion was to run wires to light up the trees at night. The Board rejected this idea, Worthen commenting that “the dawn of each new day revealed ample proof that the nocturnal activities of these birds were bad enough already, without being illuminated at the public expense.”²

FEDERAL ADVICE

The Board then sought help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which advised that the best means to drive the birds away was shooting at them with shells filled with black powder to make the loudest possible noise.

The vote was unanimous to try it.

Execution of the order went to the Police Department. “The grizzled chief, who in his time had encountered many a tough bird, warned his men that these new opponents would certainly fight back, but each officer knew that never again in a generation would he have another opportunity to shoot up the town at the public expense,” Worthen wryly commented.

A firing squad of three officers, under the command of Chief William R. McIntosh, went to Wedgemere Avenue at 6:30 p.m., seated themselves upon the curbing, and waited for the birds to arrive. The first bird went to roost at the Church Street end.



Winchester Police of 1930

“The police opened fire with their riot guns and continued to blaze away until after 8 o’clock, covering both sides of the street for its entire length. The clouds of birds driven from the trees beggars description. The sky was literally black with them and often a tree apparently free of the starlings would send a flock of 100 or more into the air,” the *Star* reported.

“Some 200 of the birds were killed as the police fired 175 shells into the branches, but it was the noise and smoke of the shells, not the slaughter, depended upon to drive away the pests. Two hundred dead had as little effect upon the flock as taking a dipper of water from lower Mystic.

“A large crowd was attracted by the firing and out-of-town motorists, believing another exhibition of fireworks was in progress, began to park their machines at points of vantage.

“The police stood by their guns and will continue to stand by them for the next four or five nights in a determined effort to rid Wedgemere avenue of its unwelcome and unsavory guests.”³

Over the course of five nights, the battle was won. “Nothing remained but the final leave-taking,” Worthen wrote. “These birds took a last leave of the town, the town took the last leavings of the birds.”

BIRDS RETURN

Nevertheless, Wedgemere Avenue continued to hold a fatal attraction for the birds (variously called starlings or grackles), who returned to the West Side year after year, undiscouraged by their reception.

Through 1952 (at least), it was reported that the police had commenced their annual battle, shooting into the trees to get the birds to decamp. At what point the yearly summer battles ended is unclear, the end coming apparently without comment.

Driving the Grackle From Winchester

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By FRANKLIN COLLIER



Reprinted from the Boston American of Friday, Aug. 21, 1929 by courtesy of the Boston American and Franklin Collier, the artist

Humorous suggestions for solving Winchester's bird problem depicted by Franklin Collier in a cartoon in the *Boston American*, reprinted in *The Winchester Star*,⁴ included importing cats, driving sharp nails into the tree limbs to prevent perching, and sending in a squadron of Army bombers.

¹ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 3, 1928.

² Board of Selectmen Annual Report, 1929. The section on the starling problem was headed "Winchester's Sturdy Birds."

³ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 23, 1929.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 21, 1928