

In the News

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Mute swans: pests or sentinels?

The New York Department of Environmental Conservation is reconsidering its recently released management plan that called for the complete elimination of the invasive mute swan (*Cygnus olor*; Figure 1) population in Long Island, New York, by 2025. The public backlash resulting from the decision is the result, in part, of an opinion piece appearing in the *New York Times* (February 2014). Anthropologist Hugh Raffles suggested in the article that beneficial species, such as honeybees and mute swans,



Figure 1. Mute swans can become pests.

should be protected because of their long history and should be considered separate from obviously injurious exotic species, such as zebra mussels (*Dreissena polymorpha*) and the kudzu (*Pueria* sp.) plant. Mute swans were introduced to the United States in the 1800s and since have caused various forms of damage to wetlands. Raffles argues that mute swans should be preserved and used as a sentinel species for ecosystem health.

In Traverse City, Michigan, however, it is a different story. According to *UpNorthLive.com*, swans looking for open water are a serious concern for motorists. The swans, which have an estimated population of >15,000 birds in Michigan, have been landing near and on

highways, posing increasing risks of collisions with motorists. Mute swans, which will often overwinter in northern latitudes, are finding the extreme cold problematic this year and are migrating farther south than usual. The swans are waterbirds, and cannot take off unless they are on water. Wildlife officials are on call to lead any stray swans back to water.

Bat fungus spreads

White-nose syndrome, a disease that is deadly to bats (Figure 2), continues to be found in new areas. In a recent press release, officials at Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky, reported that white-nose syndrome recently has been found in bats on the cave's toured passages. White-nose syndrome, which is caused by the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus*



Figure 2. Little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) showing symptoms of white-nose syndrome. (Photo by M. Moriarty, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

destructans, had been known to exist in the Mammoth Cave system since January of 2013, but only recently has it been found in the bats there. Because the fungus does not affect humans, tours and research at Mammoth Cave will continue, according to the National Park Service. Meanwhile, extensive education efforts and approved decontamination methods are in place to help prevent further spread of this disease. The fungus first was

detected in 2006 in New York state and has been spreading throughout the Northeast.

Eleven-year-old girl kills hungry cougar

An 11-year-old girl from Washington state, shot and killed an emaciated 4-year-old female cougar (*Puma concolor*; Figure 3) on the family



Figure 3. Two cougars. (Photo courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

ranch, *Methow Valley News* reported. The cougar was stalking Shelby White's 14-year-old brother as he was returning inside from feeding the family's dogs. The cat weighed approximately 23 kg; a healthy adult female should weigh twice that. Due to higher than normal cougar damage, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has issued 3 permits to hunt cougars with hounds. Each permit allows the taking of 1 cougar. Ten cougars so far this year have been killed in the region after attacking livestock and pets.

Sale of cougar meat banned

Illinois state Rep. Lou Lang introduced legislation making it a crime to sell lion (*Puma concolor*) meat for human consumption, the *New York Times* reported. Violators of the Lion Meat Act would be fined up to \$2,500 and face a prison sentence of 1 year in jail. The bill was sent to committee.

Goose crashes through plane's windscreen

A Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) struck the propeller of a Cessna 210 Centurion aircraft just minutes into its flight from Brookeridge Airpark, west of Chicago, Illinois. The bird plunged through the windscreen, sending plexiglas throughout the cockpit,

Flying Magazine reported. The pilot was able to make a safe landing. The bird striking the aircraft's propeller prior to entering the cockpit possibly reduced the damage.

Snowy owl irruption threatens airports

Eighty-five snowy owls (*Bubo scandiacus*; Figure 4) have been trapped at Logan International Airport in Boston, Massachusetts, this year, double the highest number ever caught there, according to the *Washington Post*. The large catch is due to a population surge and subsequent migration of snowy owls south; the surge could be tied to a boom in the population of lemmings (*Lemmus sibiricus*) last year. Lemmings are a favorite food of snowy owls, which usually hunt in the tundra. When they disperse south into the United States, however, they hunt in a very similar habitat—the wide-open spaces of airports—posing a risk of collision with aircraft. This year snowy owls have been sighted as far south as Jacksonville, Florida.



Figure 4. Snowy owls thrive on lemmings. (Photo by R. Laubenstein, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Vultures attack calves

An increase in the population of black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*; Figure 5) over the past several years has farmers in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee concerned. Recently, WGNS radio of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, reported that black vultures in Rutherford County, Tennessee, are killing and eating newborn calves. The vultures surround the cows in large numbers and wait for calves to drop, then attack the newborn. Because these birds are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, permits from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are required to kill them. Harassment, often is used as an effective short-term solution by farmers, who must be present when calves are born.



Figure 5. Black vultures wait for calves to be born, then attack the newborn. (Photo by J. Tower)

Alligators overrun couple's dream farm

Soon after Tom Christmas and his wife purchased a 14-ha farm in Centerville, Mississippi, in 2003, they realized that their dream property had become a nightmare. The area, which is adjacent to a Mobile Chemical farm, was overrun by alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*; Figure 6), the *New York Times* reported. Mr. Christmas tells of seeing >50 alligators crossing his property on a summer day. The Mississippi Department of wildlife, Fisheries and Parks counted ≤84 alligators in



Figure 6. American alligators are native to Mississippi. (Photo by R. Burton, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

the Mobile Chemical property ponds where the animals reside. However, many more are believed to inhabit the property. Alligators are native to Mississippi and are a protected species, so they cannot be culled. The reason for the unusually high population of the reptiles is in question. Long-time residents claim that Mobile imported them years ago, but no one knows for sure why, and the company denies doing so. Meanwhile, Christmas is preparing to go to court to find some answers.

\$20 million program targets wild hogs

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently announced a new \$20 million program to address the problems caused by wild hogs (*Sus scrofa*) throughout the United States. Annually, wild hogs are estimated to cause >\$1.5 billion in damages to agricultural and public lands. The goal of the project is to remove all wild hogs from 2 states every 3 to 5 years and to stabilize damage within 10 years. The USDA, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Wildlife Services program will take the lead in the effort, working with federal, state, and tribal entities to determine the best methods for managing wild hogs. The project will be one of the first major coordinated federal efforts to control hogs and comes after a successful pilot program in New Mexico that removed wild hogs from >5.3 million acres of land.

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