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A new way to thin a flock of messy pigeons

Linda Vista fills feeder with birth-control product

By Gordon Smith
COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

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The problem: *Columba livia*, a beady-eyed, crafty, winged creature with a voracious appetite and exceptionally bad manners.

The location: Linda Vista, where the distinctive, arching roof of Skate World Roller Rink is one of several locations where large numbers of the feathered pests – and their droppings – tend to gather.

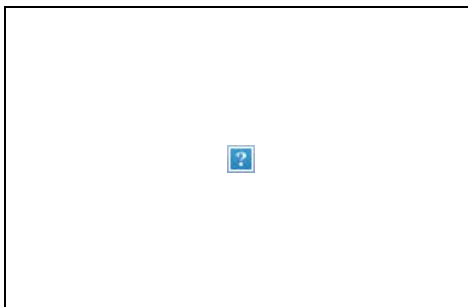
The solution: much discussed. But this week the Linda Vista Maintenance Assessment District became the second community agency in the nation to try a new birth-control product for solving its pigeon problem.

It's not a pill but kibble dispensed from a feeder on top of Skate World every morning at 6 a.m. OvoControl P, as it's known, is the brainchild of Erick Wolf of Rancho Santa Fe. He has the North American license to distribute ncarbazine, a pesticide that interferes with the hatchability of pigeon eggs.

Wolf contracts with a pet-food company that combines the ncarbazine with milled grains to create a bait that pigeons scarf down. After a few days, the chemical takes effect, and the pigeon population begins to decline, Wolf said.

Wolf – formerly a vice president with the company that manufactures ncarbazine – pointed out the humane aspects of OvoControl P. No nasty poisons, no noisy gunshots, no dead birds. Just pigeons laying eggs that don't hatch.

“There's nothing out there like it,” said Wolf, who in July obtained approval from the California Environmental Protection Agency to use ncarbazine on pigeons after registering the pesticide with the federal EPA.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune
Linda Vista's flocks of pigeons have spurred a community agency to dispense bait laced with a birth-control product. Lloyd Pest Control supervisor Ricardo Villasenor supplied a feeder with OvoControl P this week.

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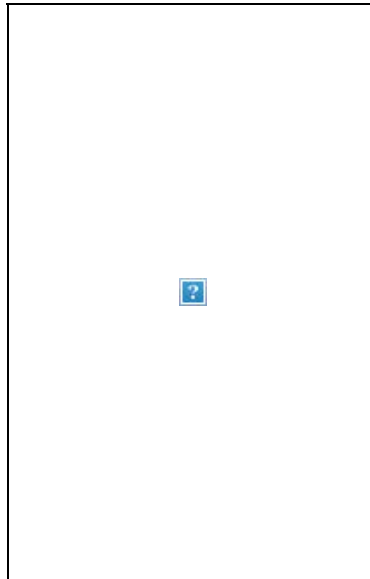
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“And it's not just the United States that has pigeons. It's a global problem,” he said.

However, first things first. The Linda Vista neighborhood in San Diego is one of several locations across the state where Wolf hopes to prove his new bait can be effective.

In Hollywood, the Argyle Civic Association recently deployed a feeder full of OvoControl P on a rooftop and plans to install several more in coming weeks. Thousands of pigeons roost in and around the neighborhood, their numbers boosted by a woman who has been feeding the birds for years, said Laura Dodson, association president.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune

The specialized bird feed is dispensed every morning from a feeder on the roof of Skate World Roller Rink in Linda Vista.

Linda Vista's pigeon plight stems in part from similarly misguided individuals who have been feeding the birds near the intersection of Linda Vista Road and Ulric Street for two years, said Wayne Bamford, a board member of the assessment district, which maintains landscaping along Linda Vista Road and Genesee Avenue.

The droppings left by hundreds of birds not only look unsightly but also sometimes blanket open-space areas where children play, Bamford said.

“This bird thing has turned into a health and safety problem,” he said.

City officials confronted a resident who was feeding the birds, and maintenance district board members have talked to social service centers about tightening oversight on food giveaways, Bamford said. Pigeons are an invasive, non-native species not protected by federal law.

But the enlarged flocks remain. Pigeons peer out from the Skate World rooftop; they gather on the roof of a church down the street; they line the telephone wires above Ulric Street.

From time to time, flocks can be seen scavenging – heads bobbing and eyes wary – on a grassy area next to a post office.

“This is a nuisance to the community,” said Gary Stang, owner and operator of Skate World. “But I'm an animal lover. For me, it was, 'How can we solve this without killing the birds?' ”

Enter Wolf, who was contacted by John Cheney, a longtime Linda Vista resident who had enough of the pigeons.

Still, while studies have shown that nicarbazin interferes with the development of pigeon and goose eggs, there hasn't been any U.S. research that tracks how quickly nicarbazin bait reduces bird populations.

“For that, you're really looking at doing population-dynamic studies,” Wolf said. “We intend to do some . . . Maybe we'll have data in a year or two.”

For now, he tells prospective buyers that a study in Rimini, Italy, in 2005-06 concluded that a nicarbazin-laced bait cut the pigeon population nearly in half.

Wolf offered to provide a year's worth of OvoControl P to the Linda Vista district at his expense. Because OvoControl P can be handled only by

licensed pest-control operators, Lloyd Pest Control agreed to provide the labor to fill and monitor the automatic feeder.

“At this point, it's really just research for us, to see if this product works,” said Herb Field, Lloyd chief operating officer.

The company used a feed-based chemical sterilizer that is no longer available to reduce the pigeon population in Balboa Park at the city's request about 20 years ago, Field said. The park's pigeon population dropped from as high as 10,000 to fewer than 2,000, he said, but the reduction took three years.

“It's a long time, and that's the inherent problem with this sort of product,” Field said. “It's not a cheap, quick fix that most people are used to.”

It takes several days of feeding for pigeons to absorb enough nicarbazin for the chemical to work, and they must keep eating the bait or the nicarbazin washes out of their systems.

That means the feeders have to be topped regularly and monitored so that pets or endangered species aren't getting to the bait before the pigeons do. “This is labor-intensive and rather expensive,” Field said.

Wolf said the bait to treat 100 pigeons costs \$7.50 a day. Labor expenses can be reduced by using automated feeders.

In recent weeks, Wolf has talked with officials in the San Francisco Bay Area and Hawaii about using OvoControl P. He recently obtained permission in California and New York to use a nicarbazin-based product for geese.

Still, some experts question whether the strategy will work. Eliminate pigeons in one area and pigeons living nearby replace them, said Charles Walcott, a professor of neurobiology and behavior at Cornell University who has studied homing pigeons for 30 years.

Getting rid of the birds at a specific site “is like bailing the Atlantic Ocean out with a thimble,” he said.

Wolf insists OvoControl P can be effective, although he recommends using it with high-frequency sound repellers, spike strips and other devices.

Nicarbazin has a low toxicity, according to the EPA. One of its byproducts can accumulate slowly in ponds, but the agency concluded that bird droppings probably represent more of an ecological risk.

In addition, hawks and other creatures that prey on pigeons aren't likely to be affected because nicarbazin's active ingredient doesn't readily enter their bloodstreams after it has been digested once, Wolf said.

After evaluating OvoControl P, San Diego's Project Wildlife agreed to endorse its use in controlling pigeons, said executive director Lisa Culver.

“It's very humane. There are no animals harmed,” she said. “We definitely see value in this.”



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune
Fed up by the nuisance caused by large numbers of pigeons, Linda Vista residents

hope to solve the problem by distributing bird feed with nicarbazin, a pesticide that interferes with the hatchability of pigeon eggs.

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