

High Noon at the YO Ranch: How Technology Helped Win the Buzzard Battle

By Evelyn Hall, Business Writer

Buzzards gliding in slow circles above arid Texas terrain – for anyone who’s ever seen a Western, it’s hard to imagine a more ominous and clear warning of doom than that spiral of vultures (called a “kettle”). But Bob Owen knows the scene can get worse – far worse – when the vultures start circling over the mundane landscape of modern living, rather than over the sad remains of some hapless film character. The carrion birds, it turns out, have a taste for trash.

This buzzard’s tale begins 20 years ago, when the 100-year-old YO Ranch, one of the largest and best known in Texas, sold off 11,000 acres of land too rugged for grazing cattle. The 100-acre parcels proved perfect for hosting some gracious homes near the community of Junction, Texas, some 130 miles west of San Antonio. Today, some plots remain undeveloped, but many others are graced by showcase homes. Some are used as weekend retreats, while others are occupied year-round. Being so far from the nearest town – Junction is 22 miles away – the subdivision’s homeowners’ association is responsible for all utilities, save electricity and phone. The association manages trash with a large, open dumpster located in a far corner of the subdivision. Landowners deposit their garbage and once a week a service hauls the load to the county landfill some 45 miles away.

Home on the Range

The vultures – both turkey vultures and black vultures - were already in residence at the dumpster when Owen bought property at YO Ranch 10 years ago. At that time, the few birds that preyed on the garbage didn’t cause that much trouble, Owen recalls. But over the years, he says, “more and more vultures were born in the area thinking our trash trailer was their inheritance.” The problem grew as more homes were built and the trash flow increased. “Their interest picked up,” he says, and the vultures’ numbers grew alarmingly.

While vultures generally do not hunt and kill animals and are not considered a direct threat to people, pets or livestock, a large number of the big birds living in close proximity to human habitation can create a clearly unpleasant situation. Turkey vultures can reach up to 32 inches in length, weigh in at 6 pounds, and sport wingspans of up to 6 feet, according to the Turkey Vulture Society. Black vultures max out at 28 inches in length, and about 5 pounds, with wingspans up to 66 inches, according to the Carolina Raptor Center's Web site. Both species are migratory and usually considered unaggressive. But like most wild animals, they can be fiercely territorial when they feel their home or food source is threatened.

“These are large birds,” Owen points out. “They could get pretty nasty. Plus we had all the disagreeable things that come with a large population of big birds living in a confined area.” At any time during the summer, up to a dozen birds might be living near the trailer, with many more visiting for a meal. Not far from the trailer, an old windmill became a favorite roosting spot for vultures waiting their turn at the chow line. The birds left fecal matter all over the trash trailer and surrounding landscape. The bags of trash they ripped open began to attract other pests, including raccoons and rats. Trash removal costs climbed as the ranch's hourly paid garbage man spent more and more time cleaning up after the birds. And increasingly common were unpleasant confrontations between landowners dropping trash and vultures defending their territory. The YO Ranchlands development was clearly heading for a show-down with its resident buzzards.

This Town Ain't Big Enough ...

In the Old West the matter might have been settled with a good old-fashioned shoot out. But today, in many areas of the country, vultures are protected species. In Texas, it is illegal to shoot or harm the birds in any way. “What's more, lethal methods don't control a bird problem long-term,” says David Kogan, a technician with Bird-X, Inc., a Chicago-based manufacturer and distributor of bird deterrence products since 1964.

Killing birds leaves a vacuum – “and nature abhors a vacuum,” Kogan says. “More birds will simply move into an area to fill the void left by the birds you killed. But, if you convince the ones already there that a spot is no longer desirable, not only will they leave, their dislike for the spot will be communicated to their potential replacements.” Being law-abiding – not to mention warm-hearted – citizens, Owen and his colleagues began looking for non-lethal ways to evict the vultures.

“First we thought of covering the trailer, but that would have created an access issue for landowners,” Owen said. “We also considered a trash compactor, but felt that could raise safety issues. Who would operate it?” Owen took a shot in the dark ... er, in the air ... and tried sound deterrent. But the shotgun blasts he aimed at the sky had little effect. The vultures would take wing when they heard the “boom,” but quickly return when they realized the fellow with the gun was no real threat to them.

Next, he tried installing a motion-activated light, thinking if the birds’ beauty rest was disrupted they may leave in search of a quieter night life. Turns out, the birds had no problem roosting with the lights on. Someone else found a paint that purported to be a vulture repellent and the association had the entire trailer and its access stairs painted with it. The vultures remained unfazed by the redecoration.

Before becoming a YO Ranch landowner – and erstwhile vulture fighter – Owen was a tenderfoot, living in a big city. He’d had bird problems of a different kind there – grackles, to be precise. Now, faced with birds about 10 times the size of the largest grackle, Owen thought it was possible the strategy he’d used to get rid of the smaller birds might work on the vultures. “As soon as we gave up on the paint, I called Bird-X,” he says. “I’d had experience with them before and they were able to help me.”

The Bird-X technicians Owen spoke to knew what to do, and put him in touch with a trailer park operator in Arkansas who’d had a similar problem. In the end, Owen settled on a CritterBlaster Pro, a sonic device that uses sound to harass undesirable birds and animals away from an area. Able to cover up to six acres, the CritterBlaster broadcasts

eight different sound irritants. Users can program the device to broadcast just one sound, or all eight on a rotating schedule.

High Noon

“We put it up last year at probably the worst possible time, the middle of the season,” Owen says. The vultures that had migrated into the area were well settled and particularly stubborn about staying. When the CritterBlaster sounded, they would leave in a huff, but many returned despite the deterrent. “Pretty quickly, the vultures showed they were annoyed, but they would get used to the pattern.”

Owen experimented with the sound settings and found that all eight sounds, randomly varied, were most effective. While the vultures didn’t disappear completely, the device greatly improved the situation to a manageable state, he says. At the end of the summer, the vultures migrated away to their winter quarters. Happy to see them go, Owen and his fellow landowners cleaned up the last of the vultures’ mess, knowing they would be better prepared to deal with the birds the next year.

Into the Sunset ...

“This year we decided to have the CritterBlaster Pro up before the first vulture showed up in the spring,” Owen says. Once again, his team installed the device. And this year they turned it on before any birds migrated into the area. After a few consultations with Bird-X and some experimentation with the device, they’ve set the CritterBlaster Pro to randomly broadcast four of the eight sound irritants on a varying schedule. The impact has been dramatic. “This year it’s 100 percent successful,” Owen says. The YO Ranchlands’ resident vultures have ridden off into the sunset.