

THE PROBLEM came about, like so many other problems that occur on boats, by a combination of little things, each in themselves harmless enough but which, when compounded, become serious.

The big problem this time was birds. Are there any sailors who have not had problems with birds, even if we limit our present considerations to the feathered variety?

Our problem was not caused by the usual seagulls, who have been cursed in these pages many times over the years, but by the ubiquitous starling. The circumstances that conspired to cause our grief were as disparate as the migratory habits of the starlings, and the fine autumn, following on from a wet summer, which together



Birds in hand

When starlings preparing for migration chose to perch on his yacht's rigging, JOHN CAMPBELL had to take some drastic action

conspired to produce a bumper crop of blackberries.

Can you guess the problem? Let me elucidate. The starlings, preparing for their long flight south, gorged themselves on the abundant blackberries. Their wanton over-indulgence had the same effect on them as eating a large bag of prunes would have on me, the difference being that I would never

contemplate sitting on somebody's masthead while my long-suffering tummy returned to normal.

The teak decks were subjected to a twice-daily purple rain, which stained everything it fell upon, while the gathering birds recovered from breakfast and supper. And I don't just mean one or two birds; I mean fifty or more at a go. They gathered two by two on each of the eight radial arms of the satnav aerial on top of the mainmast, the better to concentrate their efforts close to the mast. The overspill huddled side by side along the arm supporting the wind direction vane and anemometer cups. The remainder formed up in a procession along the triatic stay, running between the two masts. Often these birds were unable to contain their impatience to get to one of the preferred perches at the masthead, and got rid of their blackberries before reaching the upper end of the triatic.

Washing down the decks became a twice-a-day job, instead of a weekly one. Shouting at the gathering birds to 'Flock Off' had little effect, except that the neighbours hustled their children away. Rattling the halyard against the mast produced more reaction from the birds. The sudden hanging noise, and the fright it gave them, caused them to leave, but they always did so in a veritable flurry of purple rain, as if to express their disgust at being disturbed

in the throes of their post-prandial contemplation.

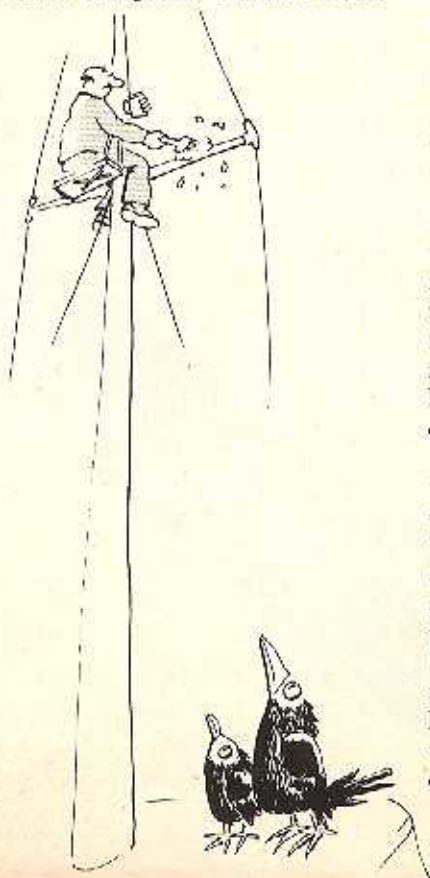
At about this stage, the diet was augmented by another type of berry, one with a pip in the middle not unlike a cherry stone. The noise of these stones hitting the deck served to add insult to injury since, whenever we heard the stones, we knew that the purple rain was also falling.

Washing down the decks became a twice-a-day job

We have yet to discover what berries contained these stones, but we should know in about three years' time. My nephew collected some, and has planted them, so when they grow we will be able to let you know. I also took to gathering stones, but for a different purpose. I used them as ammunition for my Black Widow catapult. I spent many a happy hour in the cockpit with the Black Widow, giving the birds their own back, as it were.

This harrassment was having some effect; the birds began to choose the adjacent boats for their extravasation. Alas, the birds had some allies, in the form of a couple of do-gooders who objected to my approach. In retrospect, perhaps they were just trying it on, as maybe I had scared the birds on to their boat.

In any event, the weather was



turning colder, so the sessions in the cockpit with the Black Widow were becoming less enjoyable. I decided to try a different approach. I thought about ways of making their perch less comfortable so that they would go elsewhere.

The first experiment involved a large jar of Vaseline. I took a quick trip up the mast in the bosun's chair to put Vaseline over the radial arms of the satnav aerial, since it was obviously the choice perch. The job was done in time for the evening visit, so I lay back in the cockpit with the binoculars for a ringside view. Right on cue, the first starling came in, apparently pleased to see the aerial untenanted. He came sweeping in to land on one of the arms, and the lack of grip, combined with his forward momentum, caused him to overbalance.

His little wings were revolving like a pair of propellers as he hopped forward to the next arm. He still could not get enough grip to overcome his momentum, and the whole thing was repeated as he hopped his way round the aerial. At about the fifth arm, he got the message, and just managed one little purple offering, before flying off to less greasy pastures.

A success, or so we thought. Unfortunately the success was short-lived. After a dozen birds had failed to keep their balance, one of them tried tasting the Vaseline. It perhaps had a soothing effect on their overworked digestive systems, because they started eating it. In no time at all, the aerial was clean, and there was the usual crowd of birds sitting on it, licking their beaks and looking for more Vaseline.

Definitely the right approach, just the wrong material. That's when we came up with No Perch. Relating our tale of woe to my brother-in-law resulted in a tube of the mysterious No Perch, which he was able to trade from the storekeeper of a big grainery.

It came in a silver cardboard tube, just too long to fit into one of the normal caulking guns available from Woolworths for 90p. The stuff inside the tube looked like translucent white grease, but it was, as we were to find out, incredibly sticky. I telephoned 'Mr No Perch' in London to find out its contents and if it was likely to dissolve the satnav aerial or, more to the point, the triatic stay.

He was rather evasive, saying that it was a 'co-polymer by-product of the oil industry', which didn't tell us anything at all. In the end, we decided that if the grainery was happy to spread it round the place, it was unlikely to be too caustic, so we decided to try it.

Again, the long-suffering satnav aerial became the proving ground for the goo. The arms were covered completely, and myself partially so. The only effective way to apply the stuff was to use the gun to squirt some into my hand, then to spread it over the intended places. However, the stuff is so sticky, it ended up in some unintended places as well.

Incidentally, it would be as well to point out at this stage that Swarfega hand cleaner did a reasonable job of getting the stuff off me, the bosun's chair and the binoculars. How did the binoculars get sticky? Well it was coming on for roosting time, and I was anxious to see how the stuff was going to work.

I had barely got settled in the cockpit with the binoculars before the first of the evening influx arrived, straight in,

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to land on one of the treated arms of the aerial. You could almost see the bird wrinkling its beak in disgust as the sticky goo went up between its toes. The starling shuffled from side to side, lifting each foot in turn, as if it could not believe what it had trodden in. It obviously did not like what it was feeling. It hopped on to the next arm, hoping for a cleaner perch. After it found more of the same there, it took off for another hoar. Things definitely looked promising.

That evening, the triatic stay filled up, but the aerial stayed clear, so we decided to bite the bullet and put the goo along the triatic as well. That performance would have rivalled most high wire acts at the Bertram Mills Circus. I went up the mizzen in the bosun's chair, clipped a snatch block on to the triatic; then, using the main halyard, Lana pulled me up along the triatic. I had the forethought to go to the top, and work my way down, greasing the stay along the way but, even so, nearly as much went in my hair as went on the stay. At least no starlings came to sit on my head.

Once the stay was done, a quick trip up the mainmast saw the support for the VHF aerial, the tops of the cap shrouds and the support for the wind instruments all coated.

Feeling rather smug and not a little sticky, I settled down once more to await the flock. The results were better than we could have hoped. The arriving birds found all their favourite

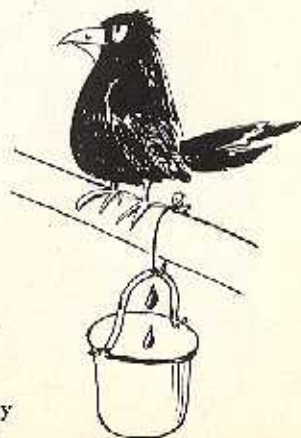
spots impossibly sticky and, after a few seconds of the two-footed shuffle, they all took off, to look for less sticky landings. All, that is, except for one very persistent fellow. This one, which was determined to stay, perched on the tiny counterbalance weight on the wind direction vane. He sat there, with a positively smug expression on his face, swinging slowly backwards and forwards in the breeze.

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I could not stand the little fellow sitting there, looking so self-satisfied. Out came the bosun's chair again, and another blob of goo was put on the vane in the gathering gloom. I washed the decks to remove his little token message and we waited for morning.

The next morning we overslept. We had become so used to the six o'clock stones falling, we slept late. When we did finally come on deck, it was clean. Not a single stone or purple message anywhere. Now if we can just get rid of the row of tail feathers that are stuck to the triatic, we can get the boat looking really smart again.

For anybody who wants to get some No Perch, it is available from No Perch Ltd, 11 Guildford Street, London WC1N 1DU (Tel: 01-242 4251). They retail it in cartons of ten tubes for £18.00 plus VAT. Their gun is £19.95 but the Woolies Special does just as well if you lop an inch off the end of the tube. One tube was sufficient to cover the masthead aerials, 30ft of triatic, the top 3ft of the cap shrouds and a fair proportion of my body. Ten cartridges could perhaps be bought between several boats. Swarfega hand cleaner is available in large tins (and you will need a large tin) from most motoring and some DIY shops. ◊



Cartoons by Bill Beavis