FNE97-184

final

JAN 30 1998

Using Dogs to Control Bird Preditation of Blueberries

Birds often mean disaster to the blueberry grower. They must be kept out of the patch since they can destroy up to 70% of the crop in modest size plantings. As the predictor bird population continues to increase, the problem becomes more important. No season-long control is now available except to cover the planting with net. Netting is costly … $3,500+ per acre … and it still takes considerable labor to put it in place and remove it each year.

At Val's Berry Farm we grow berries for the pick-your-own trade. Blueberries are the major crop and have been for 35 years. All of the popular bird control methods have been used at one time or another with little long term success.

Dogs have been bred and trained for many different types of work over the years, but bird control doesn't seem to have been assigned to dogs. It would appear to be well within their capability.

Researching some of the literature, of a few breeds seemed to have characteristics that could make them candidates for this work. Two breeds were chosen … Australian Cattle Dog and the Finnish Spitz for the '97 season. An underground radio fence was installed around areas of the patch so as to confine a dog to 1 ½ to 2 acres of blueberry patch to patrol. The dogs were free to roam, and lived there day and night.

Training consisted of encouraging the dogs to chase birds. In the absence of birds, moving objects above their heads were substituted.

Some basic training was also necessary just to be able to handle the dogs.

To determine the effectiveness of the dogs, scattered blueberry bushes were marked in each of the enclosed areas. Two blueberry clusters in each of those bushes were then marked and the berries counted before they ripened. All of this was recorded so that during the harvest period these clusters could be counted daily to determine the losses to birds.

Daily counting of the berries in the selected clusters also provided an excellent opportunity to observe the dogs activity. Their alertness, location, and general behavior was noted.

The results look promising but more work is required to improve the dogs attentiveness. The Australian Cattle Dog was quite easily distracted by people

(she is very friendly) and likes woodchucks. Her mid-day activity due to heat, was diminished.

Fortunately birds are not around as much in the hottest part of the day. Her overall effectiveness is judged to be 50%.

The Sptiz dogs don't have the great desire to be with people, thus that "distraction" is essentially eliminated. They are attracted by all the four-legged animals as well as birds. They are affected by the heat so their activity is decreased when it's hot. The Spitz has a natural tendency to wander in their area which is very desirable. The birds want to be alone as they fly in to eat. Just the sight of a dog prowling around is an excellent deterrent.

An adult male and female plus a "teen-age" Spitz were part of the '97 trial. The female was much superior to the male. The male didn't have enough interest in birds – there were always woodchuck holes and mice to spend time on! The adult female was interested in chasing birds but woodchuck holes and mice do distract her. The protective results in her area were quite good, approximately 70%. The teenager was not mature enough to accomplish much.

There were shortcomings to the project that are obvious in hindsight. The territorial nature of the dogs was not utilized. They were moved from one location to another for various reasons. They were not specifically sensitized to look for birds instead of mice, for example.

Dogs present a real possibility for bird control. Since each dog has a different personality, selection of the most successful individuals will be important. Some rather special sensitivity training will probably be required to help direct their "total" interest to birds.

A.C. Valonen

A.C. Valonen

L.R. Valonen

L.R. Valonen