The BioVeterinary Group

Integrated biological, veterinary and behavioural consultancy

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Dear Elaine

Thanks for your queries. You raise two questions concerning predator-prey associations and ask me to consider these in connection with the pigeons at Trafalgar Square and the presence of gulls and the use of the hawk.

These are your questions:

1) "does the presence of a predator/the hawk clear the Square of birds?"

2) "does the presence of a predator/the hawk deter passing birds from descending to the Square?"

As a scientist who has been extensively involved with the pigeons at the Square (including observations of the hawk) my views are as follow:

Regarding question 1): No, the hawk does not clear the Square of birds. The accumulation of birds is greatest (approximately 3,000) shortly before feeding time (around 0700 hrs). Shortly after feeding (approximately 30 mins) around half of the birds (transients) have departed the Square of their own accord. Typically, less than one-third (1,000) remain on the Square after 45 mins. The use of the net (used for bird sampling and capture eg for physical assessment and removal of line entanglements) clears the Square's plaza of almost all or all birds. Approximately 200-400 birds remain on or around the Square (ie largely on the plinth - at least until it was fitted with spikes) and these are the resident population - ie they are there all day. Counts throughout the day show that the number of resident birds remains about the same. Therefore, pigeons numbers at the Square are reduced from 3,000 to 200-400 by approximately 0800 - ie about one hour before the arrival of the hawk and thus the resident population is unaffected by the presence of this predator.

Regarding question 2): I think it is unlikely that a predator such as a gull or the hawk would deter passing pigeons from descending to the Square. First, I have seen no evidence of such deterrence nor of large increases in pigeon numbers during the day. Second, I have personally witnessed the hawk being displayed to the public while pigeons gather within a few feet of the predator and its handler - ergo their 'flight distance' (the point at which prey make a 'run for it') was not even