

Rookery at Victoria Park - Implications to air safety.

Objective

This short report is a rationale and review of options presented by the development of a small rookery (circa 20 nests) which became established in the northern corner of Victoria Park in spring 2020, 300 metres from the airport's southern landing approach.

Risk

The aim of George Best City Airport 's Wildlife Hazard Assessment (WHA) is to identify sources of risk and to assess the relative severity of those risks and reduce and maintain risk to an acceptable level in compliance to Civil Aviation Authority licensing requirements . Risk assessment is difficult with low frequency events and, for bird strike risk, factors such as size and flocking behaviour may be more significant than simple frequency of occurrence.

Rooks, by individual mass (c.310g), have a low severity rating for engine damage and as no bird strikes pertaining to this species have occurred at George Best City Airport during the most recent 5 year review, the risk matrix for this species is scored as low.

Daily bird observation records kept by the airport to monitor local trends have recorded an increasing frequency of rook occurrence around the airport, doubling over the last three years, with the average number of rooks per observation also up by 50% (from 6 to 9) to a level whereby the probability of an air strike might be expected to rise (Fig 1). Manipulating inter runway habitat and regular scaring to dissuade birds from landing around the airport is the mainstay of risk reduction. However, even if these growing risks are being adequately managed, these methods may not influence the establishment of regular flight lines that traverse the airport's landing approach between the adjacent rookery and possible foraging destinations, potentially elevating collision risk for this species further. It is therefore in the interest of public safety that the airport must act with due diligence and flag any perceived potential threat while at a manageable scale. As there is similar habitat contiguous to the present rookery it would be prudent to assume that after any breeding success the colony will likely expand further into the park.

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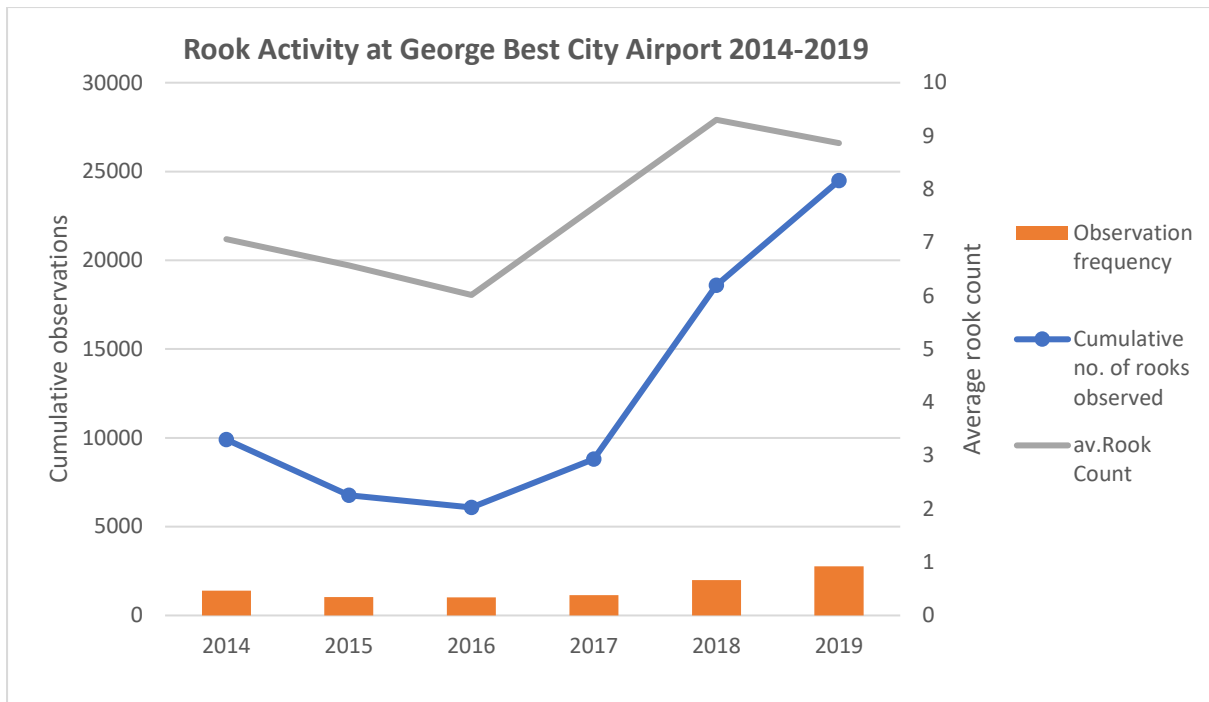


Fig 1.

Proposed Remedial Action

Remedial action in the first instance would involve the removal of old nests – outside of the breeding season - to prevent them advertising the suitability of the site to new prospecting pairs. As site fidelity after only one year might still be strong, any signs of rebuilding would need to be discouraged until the habitat can be modified to the extent that rooks no longer find it attractive. Such management prescriptions would include thinning of sheltering pines, strategic structural pruning of preferred nesting trees, and reducing shelter from high level ivy.

To ensure optimal results, these prescriptions would normally be enacted simultaneously, however, with time scale limitations and managing sensitivities of park users, an element of phasing may be the only option available, with nest removal as the first priority. A proposed target deadline of mid-January is specified to buffer against the chance of a resurgence of rook activity - in advance of an early spring. If nest building resumes the issue of active discouragement by regular removal of nest foundations in late February/March becomes a more delicate necessity and well informed PR management an integral part, regardless of the legitimacy of the action and/or the legality to operate under license in the interests of public safety. Monitoring and reviewing efficacy of management actions, managing negative feedback and any management refinement would be communicated efficiently among the relevant stakeholders to ensure a successful outcome.

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Wildlife is not always predictable, and all scenarios must therefore be envisaged to enable the most appropriate response as the situation evolves. Response to management prescriptions similarly need to be monitored to guide effort required and for any potential refinement.

Nest removal

As the rook nests are between 10 and 15m high, it is envisaged that most can be dislodged from the ground or the higher ones from ladders, using extended poles. Recording trees used and photographing nests before and after removal will inform and facilitate any structural pruning that might be feasible as a management tool. In the event of nest rebuilding the same information would be recorded prior to removal.

Any thinning or structural pruning would have to be carried out using a suitable contractor prior to the nesting season.



Extent of 2020 rookery at Victoria Park

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Rookery showing habitat type (ivy clad oak/birch with pines behind)