

'The Birds' have met their match

- *By Ken Burger*
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If you really want to know if a product works, talk to the man who uses it.

That's why I went straight to Johnny Ackerman, the man who was varnishing Fred Wichmann's 42-foot boat on the Stono River.

"No bird poop on the boat," Johnny said with a smile. "I'm the one who has to keep it clean. So I tell you, it works." Rob Turkewitz couldn't ask for a better endorsement for his new invention, WhirlyBird Repeller, a plastic, spinning, whizzing, wobbling contraption designed to keep birds away from your dock.

Turkewitz, a Charleston attorney, first envisioned the product with a friend as they fought the endless battle of bird poop on their dock along the Intracoastal Waterway.

They started by cutting up a plastic soda bottle, letting the wings spin in the breeze to scare off the birds. They gradually refined the product until they came up with the WhirlyBird.

Wichmann, a 79-year-old sailor on Charleston's waterways, has had two of the gizmos on his dock for three years and says the wind-blown whatchamacallits work.

"Gulls, pelicans, seabirds, they all poop on somebody else's dock now," Wichmann said, pointing up and down the waterway.

The Wobble

To date, Turkewitz has sold about 500 of the instruments on the Internet (whirlybirdrepeller.com) and received some glowing reports from users, including the U.S. Coast Guard, which has tested the product on its navigational aids. While birds are part of the natural environment along the coast, they can be a nuisance. People have tried everything from noise makers to fake owls and snakes to banging pots and pans to keep them away.

So it's interesting to see this plastic problem solver at work, spinning in the afternoon breeze, hardly noticeable. During the course of development, Turkewitz said he's learned that the secret is twofold. One, the Whirlybird is designed to reflect light, which causes sporadic flashes that frighten the birds. And, he says, it's the way the Whirlybird is mounted so that it wobbles a bit when spinning.

"It's definitely the wobble," he said. "We don't always know why things work, but it works."

Sweet Spot

Produced locally, WhirlyBird is an ingeniously simple product that's environmentally friendly and sells for about \$50. It's also been tested by Jim Irvin, owner of Irvin-House Vineyards on Wadmalaw Island. He said he tried shotguns, kites and scarecrows but still had problems with foraging birds when his muscadine grapes were ripening.

"After installation of the WhirlyBirds, foraging came to an abrupt end," he said, adding that the result was a 20 percent greater yield.

After harvesting the grapes, he removed the devices and the birds returned to clean up the bad and leftover fruit. Turkewitz said there have been occasions where the product wasn't successful, mainly due to lack of breeze or improper mounting.

"You have to experiment with it a little," he said. "There's a sweet spot where it will work best for the environment. Also, for some reason, it doesn't work for ducks."

Things are going so well, in fact, Turkewitz is holding a promotional event tonight at the Terrace Theatre on James Island where patrons can get free admission to see, what else, Alfred Hitchcock's thriller, "The Birds."

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