

# Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue

## Feather Guard

By Stiles Thomas

*An innovative solution to the vexing problem of window-killed birds.*

**Reprinted from *Bird Watcher's Digest*, September/October '01 with permission of author and publisher.**

My wife, Lilly, and I were married in 1946, right after the war and started feeding birds when we returned from our honeymoon. Since then hundreds of birds have smashed into the windows of our home. Some recover and fly off, but many don't.

A hawk-watching friend told me that a Cooper's hawk had crashed into a window and he was going to have it mounted, which was not legal at the time. When he proudly showed me the finished product, it was necessary to inform him that it was a ruffed grouse. Actually, the wing and overall measurements of these birds is approximately the same, so it's an understandable, if stupid, mistake. Grouse seem to have a penchant for committing suicide: I'm aware of five such cases. One hit our bedroom window, and glass was projected 20 feet into the adjoining room! Fortunately no one was home, and luckily the bird ricocheted off and flew away. Identification was made from feathers left behind. Today it would be done through DNA.

Many birds striking windows, and living to tell the tale, leave an identifiable oil and dust contour of their bodies, much like the chalk outline of a murder victim. I've identified hawks by merely measuring the wing print. Mourning doves leave a recognizable silhouette, as do cardinals, who sometimes leave red feathers on the glass. Sometimes a bird's brief last meal is deposited on the window as a petri dish specimen for the ornithologist.

Glass is the single largest unnatural killer of birds in the United States according to Daniel

Klem, a biologist at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He estimates that up to 1 billion birds die this way each year in North America. Most of us know horror stories about window kills and people who have found dead birds next to their house feel the guilt. Could we have done something to prevent it? Was it our fault because the feeder was too close to the house? To try to end the slaughter you may have attached hawk silhouettes to your windows. But did it work? Probably not. Some people have pasted on phony plastic spider webs with the whatchamacallit in the middle that spiders are suppose to weave so birds won't fly into the web and destroy it (a white-throated sparrow scored a bull's-eye on ours the day we put it up.) Pulling the drapes doesn't help either. We've all tried that one.

One friend has even kept a death list. During the 34 years he's lived in his home members of 26 different species have met their ends by flying into his windows. Although he's not kept a record of the total kill, he believes that mourning doves are more prone to striking windows than other birds. That's my impression, too. Perhaps it's because of their rocketing take-off. Three kinds of woodpeckers – downy, pileated, and northern flicker have met their demise flying into his house. An astounding six thrush species have met a similar fate – the wood thrush, hermit, Swainson's, gray-cheeked, American robin, and veery. Five kinds of warblers, having migrated thousands of miles to or from Central and South America, have met their end at his doorstep. Professor Klem isn't exaggerating.

My household had a similar avian mortality problem. Our most active bird feeder is 10 feet away from our three living room windows. When we would erect it in the fall, birds hit the glass immediately. My solution was *Feather-Guard*, my unpatented method of deterring birds from flying into windows. I'm not sure what the principle is, but it works. The first year I performed a double-blind test by placing my clever invention on just two of the three windows – birds only struck the control window. This year

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I placed it on all three panes, and not one window has even been grazed by a bird.

*FeatherGuard* is easy to make, and costs little. It is attractive, but not to birds. Furthermore, *FeatherGuard* is an attention getter. When you have it in place, you'll be the envy of your birding friends. I make them in less than 10 minutes per window, and you can, too. Start right now. Try it on windows that get hit the most. Materials required are monofilament fishing line and feathers. You can buy a bag of feathers at a local crafts store – medium-sized feathers (about six to eight inches long) work best.



The author's windows showing the domestic bird feathers tied to vertically hung strings. These feathers seem to warn other birds away.

**Step one:** measure the window from top to bottom. Add two feet to the measurement to allow for fastening to the house and to allow *FeatherGuard* to blow in the wind.

**Step two:** Drill a 1/16-inch hole (1.5 mm) in the feather shaft at about the center of gravity.

**Step three:** Thread the feather and slide it to the middle of the line. Then tie a simple knot to keep it in place. Next slide on another feather about seven inches on each side of the first and tie it in place. Attach the remaining feathers until you've got a feather every seven inches or so. Don't forget to leave a foot or so at each end to fasten the rig to the top and bottom of your window. All measurements are approximate. Nothing is set in stone.

(Note: If you do not have a drill, simply tie the feathers to the line.)

**Step four:** Tap a long flat-head nail into the window frame above and below the window so the nail protrudes two or three inches from the frame. This will keep the feathers away from the glass. The nail should be perpendicular to the frame so the line doesn't slide. Then secure the line at the nail head. There should be enough slack to permit the *FeatherGuard* to sway from one side of the glass to the other. That's all there is to it. Sorry, but the *FeatherGuard* won't deter birds from soiling your car. I'm working on it, though.

A swaying *FeatherGuard* is a thing of beauty. People are entranced by it. Staring at a *FeatherGuard* in motion gives almost as much pleasure as gazing into the fireplace or watching the birds at your feeder.

When you see how it prevents birds from striking your windows, you'll be as pleased as I am.