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Mass mortality of birds of prey caused by Azodrin, an organophosphorus insecticide

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Abstract

Mass increases of the levant vole (*Microtus guentheri*) are common in alfalfa fields in Israel. Deep ploughing, which is the main factor controlling vole numbers in other agricultural areas, is not possible in alfalfa. As alfalfa is a preferred food, voles in these fields are not attracted to poison baits and cannot be controlled by this means.

A particularly striking increase of voles developed during the winter of 1975â€“1976 on 8 km² of alfalfa fields in the northern Huleh Valley in Israel. This mass increase attracted large numbers of raptors and owls, mainly those wintering and on migration, but also resident species.

Because the voles, which reached densities of 2400/ha, caused considerable damage to the alfalfa crop, destroying it completely in some places, the farmers sprayed the fields with Azodrin (Monocrotophos). This persistent insecticide is recommended in Israel only

for the control of pests on cotton and in orchards. The dangers to wildlife described on the original label do not appear in the Hebrew translation.

Due to secondary poisoning with Azodrin there was a mass mortality of raptors and owls that had fed on poisoned voles and birds on these 8 km². 116 raptors and 29 owls were found dead during December 1975 through February 1976; 53 raptors and 16 owls were found poisoned but still alive, and were saved and later released. According to repeated counts of the black kite (*Milvus migrans*) population in the area it was estimated that about twice as many birds as those found were affected. Since it is probable that no poisoned birds could recover in the field, about 400 birds of prey had been destroyed on 8 km² within three months.



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