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Gun Club roped in to keep birds out of airport

By Kimberly Spykerman

GIVEN that flocks of birds can be sucked into and disable aeroplane engines, Changi Airport is determined to keep them out.

With aviation safety in mind, the Changi Airport Group (CAG) has gone as far as to call in members of the Singapore Gun Club to shoot down birds, particularly the larger ones.

As with airports elsewhere, this has put Changi on a collision course with animal activists and zoologists, who argue against the taking of life and for maintaining the diversity of species and the balance of nature, which may be upset with larger predatory birds being taken down.

But with planes making the news from time to time after being forced to land, or even crashing, when migratory birds get caught in their engines, the CAG has had to take preventive measures.

Its spokesman stressed that shooting was a last resort and would be done only on a need-to-basis; other bird-control measures used in airports elsewhere are also in place.

The CAG has obtained clearance from the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) to trap or shoot birds which pose a threat to air safety.

Gun club members are called in once a month, and weekly between October and March, the migratory season. What started out as an occasional call for help has become a regular assignment.

Club spokesman Patrick Chen, 60, said the group usually looks out for the white-bellied sea eagle, one of the largest birds of prey in South-east Asia and common here.

These coastal birds, which prey on fish and sea snakes, can grow to 0.6m in length from beak to tail tip. Thousands survive in the wild, but their numbers have been declining; they are listed here as birds that could become endangered.

Although they are off the AVA's list of six 'pest birds' like crows and pigeons - fair game for killing - the agency makes exceptions in cases where birds put lives, property and crops at risk.

The gun club said its members take down no more than three eagles on each field trip, and sometimes none at all, because these birds fly fast and as high as 100m above ground.

Smaller birds like hawks and mynahs are left alone because they are less threatening to passenger safety.

Mr Chen said the gun club does not see its task as sport: 'It's not something that is fun or something we enjoy doing. But when it comes to human lives, somebody has got to make a call, and somebody has got to do it.'

The exact number of birds shot down at the airport is unavailable, said CAG.

Animal activists have raised concerns about the ecological impact of these cullings, and do not see the move as a long-term solution to the problem.

Mr Louis Ng, who heads Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) said: 'You can't keep shooting them...If there are areas to roost and food to eat, even if you kill one, another will take its place.'

Retired botany lecturer Wee Yeow Chin, who now heads a group studying bird ecology, pointed out that getting rid of these birds of prey would swell the numbers of smaller pest birds.

Pilot Jaffar Hassan, 36, said he is not too concerned about bird strikes here because air traffic controllers warn pilots of the predicted migratory tracks of birds, and even delay take-offs.

He said that while a bird getting sucked into an engine could well cause engine failure, most planes have more than one engine, making it 'very, very unlikely' that all engines would be crippled and the plane would be in trouble.

He has encountered only one bird strike in his 20 years of flying.

Airport officials said the less drastic measures to keep the birds away, also used at military airports, are not always effective.

For example, rat poison is sprayed on the grounds to keep rats - a food source for birds of prey - in check; stagnant water is drained so mosquitoes, another food source, do not breed.

Holes in the ground are filled so birds cannot pick at earthworms. The grass is always shorn and fruit trees are a no-no.

Sounds of birds in distress, barking dogs and ear-splitting screams are also broadcast to scare birds away.

CAG also works with organisations near the airfield to ensure that they too put similar measures in place.

All such moves are reviewed periodically, given the adaptable nature of birds.