



The Truth About Birds and Paint

U.K. Car Makers Wrestle With 'Random Paint Corrosion'

First they laughed and said it was an "act of God," but now the U.K.'s automobile and paint industries are taking seriously an unusual problem—bird droppings.

This past summer U.K. drivers started to complain to their car dealers about paint corrosion appearing in random places on their cars. In most cases, the cars were less than five years old and the problem only seemed to be occurring in certain areas of the country—coastal towns and regions with high bird populations.

The automobile industry responded by saying that the mysterious paint erosion must have been caused by something the car owners were doing such as cleaning their cars with a substance which dealers do not recommend.

But the car owners were not satisfied.

Then, almost by accident, a clue behind the random paint corrosion was unveiled. Several drivers asked independent car experts to examine their vehicles. The results showed that the problem was caused by an acidic substance, and the carriers of that acidic substance were everywhere.

An "Act of God"

The U.K. has had a bad fruit season, resulting in a lot of fruit going to waste. For local bird populations this has been like a gift from God, and they have been busy feeding on the unexpected windfall. But the more fruit they eat, the more acidic are their droppings which have been, unfortunately, deposited on nearby cars.

The independent experts say that the acidity in the bird droppings has been reacting with water-based paints and lacquers sprayed onto the cars. The droppings apparently are causing the paint to blister, exposing either bare metal or the undercoat, which has translated into random paint corrosion for many vehicles.

The automobile industry and, to an extent, the paint industry, had been accused of not taking the problem seriously, however, until the U.K.'s leading consumer television program, "Watchdog," stepped in. In September, the show reported on two Renault Clio cars. Both are under three years old, travel the same roads to and from work, and are from the same locale.

The main difference between the cars is that they are different models and the cheaper of the two has begun to suffer random paint corrosion.

The culprit is bird droppings, according to Watchdog. Worse still for the car's owner, this kind of corrosion is not covered by warranty because it is "an act of God," so the car dealer had refused to pay for an expensive re-spray of the car. That is, until Watchdog stepped in.

For-the-Birds Paint

The dealer had a change of heart and announced he would have the car re-sprayed at no cost to the owner, and that he would talk with his paint manufacturer to see if a "bird dropping resistant paint" could be developed.

The story, however, does not end there.

It appears that this particular type of acidic corrosion only affects cars of certain ages, typically cars less than five years old. Some say this coincides with the U.K.'s switch from lead-based to water-based paints.

The U.K. uses a letter at the start of registration plates to indicate the year in which the car was bought. P was last year's letter. Most of the cars affected have been P registration cars, according to the Drivers and Vehicle Licensing Agency, which is responsible for plates.

Car manufacturers say that car owners should wash their cars as soon as they see any droppings on them. But for most car owners, this is not practical. The car manufacturers argue that if a bird does its business on a person's clothes, that person would not expect the shop he or she bought the clothes from to offer a refund for damages.

The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, London, sent a spokesperson to the Watchdog studios to tell viewers that, in the Society's view, bird droppings were not the culprit. The spokesperson said that perhaps the bird droppings were eating through the top, lacquer layer and not causing any damage to the paint below. He did not offer an explanation, however, as to what was causing the mysterious corrosion.

Also, Vauxhall, the U.K. division of General Motors, and Korea's Daewoo announced that there was a problem caused by bird droppings. Like the Society, however, neither manufacturer was willing to offer an explanation as to what else the problem could be.

Watchdog was not to be deterred and asked Chris Bowden from the Uni-

versity of North London to test the effect of bird droppings on the paint of a new Renault. Bowden did so over a 40-hour period; the results were visible blistering and pitting of the lacquer coat but the water-based paint underneath appeared to be fine.

Bowden said he thinks that the droppings are acting like a sponge for rain water, and that the combination of this and the possible acidity of the bird droppings is attacking the lacquer and possibly the paint. He also said that further tests performed over a longer period of time are required to determine if this is the case. Bowden and his team are currently performing these tests.

Not a Peep?

Much of the paint industry has remained quiet through this ordeal. However, one paint maker who did not wish to be identified recently spoke with *Modern Paint*. "We weren't aware that we were supposed to be devising a paint that can withstand bird lime." He said, "We produce paint to what the car manufacturer and the consumer demand, though. I'm sure the industry will be looking into what can be done about this problem."

Recently, PPG Industries' Coatings and Resins division, Birmingham, sent a fax to Watchdog asking if the research and other program information on random paint corrosion could be sent to their officials so they could pursue the matter further.

Observers say that the mystery of random paint corrosion is slowly being solved, but it seems that the demanding U.K. car buyer has not been demanding enough as the problem has not been reported in other E.U. countries. Cars bought elsewhere and brought to the U.K. reportedly have not suffered the same problem.

While the jury is still out on the corrosion issue, many feel as the paint industry source who did not wish to be identified, does: "The birds are definitely having the last laugh."

—Sara Edlington
in Doncaster,
England

