

A pretty clear picture of what caused this “bird problem” is starting to appear. That lone group of trees downtown had all the conditions in place to make it a problem:

- there were virtually no other street trees nearby, so the birds had no other real choices from which to pick
- the trees had thick canopies (many branches, heavy leaf cover)
- the trees were bunched closely together (adding to the density of the tree cluster)
- near a water source (fountains and river)
- near a food source (sidewalk cafes)
- lack of educational efforts to make sure everyone involved is aware of the benefits of street trees: if one is aware of the “problems” associated with something (such as trees), but hasn’t been made aware of the sometimes subtle but still very important benefits, that person would likely conclude that the only logical option in this case is to eliminate the source of the “problem”

I think that the following, multi-pronged approach should eliminate, or at least widely reduce, the bird problem for the future:

1. Tree choice: many trees spread throughout downtown and neighboring areas (Broadway, Riverfront Park), on every street will completely disperse the problem. If, for example, the birds have 200 trees to pick from, instead of 4, they’ll be less likely to all crowd into one small area, like they did in those 4 trees that were chopped down.
2. Tree species: choose tree species that have a thinner branch/leaf canopy. Thickness of canopy appears to be the issue, not tree height/size.
3. Tree variety: include several varieties on the streets. Do not plant the same tree species on every street downtown
4. Tree placement: do not bunch too closely together. Spread them out, such as every 20 feet or so.
5. Food source: be sure to keep sidewalks and cafes cleaned of food scraps.
6. Cleanliness: hose bird droppings from sidewalks religiously.
7. Predator: explore possibility of a Peregrine Falcon. These birds have successfully kept nuisance birds out of urban districts in other areas.
8. Education: communicate the value of street trees as a widely-recognized critical ingredient that helps a good street become a great street

Here are the links from two Midwestern sites dealing with the issue of birds in street trees:

- <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/for/for62/for62.htm>
- <http://lancaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/factsheets/076-99.htm>

As you are probably aware, virtually every successful commercial shopping/entertainment district includes street trees. Trees cut down on noise, shield pedestrians from rain, they shade and cool the streets and sidewalks, cut down winter wind, and are pleasing aesthetically. Studies have shown that people will shop more, stay longer and spend more on streets with trees. Streets with sidewalk cafes, in particular, almost universally include street trees, large ones, and lots of them. Trees slow down the cars, and provide a barrier between vehicles and pedestrians. Downtown Alton can’t be the only downtown district in the world where street trees cannot exist. That’s what I’ve found so far, with a little help from the experts.