



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## *Institute Helps Solve Human/Wildlife Conflicts*

**By Karen Brasher**

Flying low across the water, looking for a good meal, the black-crowned night heron quickly caught the attention of Mississippi catfish producers.

Farmers first noticed the 22- to 28-inch, stocky-bodied bird in the spring of 2004. With its black cap, gray wings and red eyes, the bird created concern among producers because it appeared to prefer feeding on 6- to 7-inch catfish fingerlings.

Farmers turned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services agency in Starkville for help in assessing the threat to the business from the species, which prior to three years ago was found primarily in swamps and other natural wetlands. "Farmers first called Wildlife Services and complained about a weird bird they were seeing at night," said Andrea "Andi" Cooper, a wildlife and fisheries graduate student at Mississippi State University.

Cooper, a native of Canton, had just completed a bachelor's degree in wildlife science at MSU and was interning for the federal agency.

"The call came in at just the right time to give me an opportunity to study the catfish predator," Cooper said.

With support from the Berryman Institute, she surveyed catfish ponds from June until September in 2004, 2005 and 2006 to gain a better understanding of the nocturnal bird and to provide information to develop a plan to alleviate a potential problem for catfish producers.

The opportunity to solve a problem for the catfish industry and for Cooper to pursue her degree was among many provided by the Berryman Institute.

The institute works closely with the USDA Wildlife Services agency to help minimize human/wildlife conflicts and develop innovative solutions that allow for a harmonious coexistence.

Established in 1993 and named for Utah native Jack H. Berryman, a 30-year U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service veteran, the Berryman Institute consists of two branches: Berryman West at Utah State University and Berryman East at MSU.

The institute focuses on long-term strategies to benefit wildlife while reducing the potential damage and nuisance that animals can cause. It also provides education and outreach programs to help people better understand wildlife behavior.

"The Berryman Institute facilitates research through the use of requests for proposals and solicitation," said codirector Bruce Leopold, department head of wildlife and fisheries at MSU. "Instead of hiring someone to solve a problem, the Berryman Institute finds the best expert in the subject area and funds the research through graduate fellowships."

The approach allows the institute to be proactive in solving human/wildlife conflicts.

"The Board of Advisors is careful not to duplicate research but rather identify all available knowledge and then fill in the information gaps," Leopold added.

Berryman has funded 55 separate research projects in 25 states and provided 13 undergraduate internships and 20 graduate fellowships.

"The research programs are diverse and include the economic threat posed by cormorants and black-crowned night herons and other predators in Mississippi catfish ponds, the impact of feral hogs on forest and wildlife communities, ways to reduce deer/vehicle collisions," Leopold said.

Berryman also provides an extensive outreach component. Currently, Jessica Tegt, a doctoral student from Milwaukee, Wis., is surveying the federal Wildlife Services employees to develop a national needs assessment.

"Berryman finds the current needs in the work force and finds a national expert to provide training on subjects such as conflict resolution, stress, team building and other skills," Leopold said. "We build the work force and provide critical training that would not be possible without the Berryman Institute."

The outreach program also is developing a national education program to assist biologists and others in collecting samples.

"With the avian bird flu and other illnesses, it is important that all individuals—from dog catcher to wildlife biologist—understand the proper method of collecting wildlife carcasses," Leopold said. "With an interactive CD produced by the institute, an employee can enter the species type and the compact disk will give instructions on the proper handling of the remains and the nearest diagnostic lab."

This works well with MSU's land-grant mission of providing research and educational programs to benefit the people of the state, Leopold added.

The work of the institute also helps emerging professionals like Andi Cooper, who said, "My education, the networking opportunities and my future career are a direct result of the Berryman Institute. I could not have received an advanced degree without the graduate fellowship provided by Berryman."