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Oddly sustainable: birds get robot protectors

In this week's collection of off-the-wall items, phone books are not your friends and organic may be losing its snobbishness

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Dutch startup Clear Flight says its robot birds, mimicking falcons or eagles, can scare real birds – like these – away from dangerous places. Photograph: CARLO ALLEGRI/REUTERS

Birds of a feather flock together and they are known to flock off rather fast at the sight of a predator. But will they retreat as quickly if the predator's "feathers" are man made? A new Dutch company called Clear Flight Solutions hopes so. It has begun testing robot birds, units that could be of interest for all manner of facilities that are besieged with birds.

Oddly Sustainable readers might remember the item on the BrightSource solar plant accused of "incinerating" overflying birds in the Mojave desert. Both solar and wind power installations do kill birds, though nothing on the scale of the destruction caused by fossil fuel operations (or buildings – or cats).

Fight or flight?

While many of these facilities already have bird-death mitigation plans underway, they will soon have a new idea to consider: robot hawks – you can choose from either a falcon or an eagle – aiming to be realistic

enough to scare away even the bravest of birds.

"The Robirds could definitely help by creating a barrier between the birds and the power plant," Nico Nijenhuis, founder of Clear Flight, told me.

In combination with other technology, Robirds could divert real birds from their usual flight paths, he added. "That should definitely lead to less birds catching fire," he said.

The Robirds are in the final testing stages, according to Clear Flight, which claims that bird traffic declined by 50% or more – at some landfill sites – when the robo birds took flight.

Next year, the company, which is working with several partners and aviation authorities, plans to start "major trials" at airports to see how Robirds can be integrated into existing airside operations, Nijenhuis said. Clear Flight plans to make the robots commercially available by the second half of next year.

Robirds have flapping wings and are designed to mimic the real creatures, producing a silhouette to trigger fear in the creatures. "The birds can fly pre-programmed, but it is often far more effective (and a lot more fun) to operate the birds from the ground," Nijenhuis said.

Snobs, watch out: organics go mainstream

Stop the presses: if you are young, rich and liberal, you are likely to have a hankering for organic food. Yes, in a [Gallup poll](#), shocking just about no one, it turns out organic food is being hoovered up by all the usual suspects in big cities.

But not so fast. The poll shows that organic food is also gaining wider acceptance. Nearly half of Americans, or 45%, now seek out organic food to satiate cravings, while 15% will go out of their way to push the liberal mush from their tables, according to the July poll of more than 1,000 adults.

"Given that almost half of Americans actively try to include organic foods in their diets, they may view the benefits of organic foods as greater than their downsides, such as the higher cost or limited access," according to a Gallup statement.

Organic products are no longer the preserve of health stores and Whole Foods. [Walmart announced in April](#) it was getting into the business, and promised much lower prices would follow.

It also turns out organic food isn't just for the trendy types on the east and west coasts. It has plenty of fans in the midwest, with the survey showing 47% support. Could it be that folks in America's breadbasket know a thing or two about where our food comes from?

Mellow yellow

Your stack of books, CDs and even board games can now fit comfortably in your favorite handheld device. But what about that big fat Yellow Pages book? Not so much. It's more likely to be lingering on a front door step, in an overstuffed bin or at a landfill site.

Phone books, as they are usually called, are a waste of resources and a burden on public recycling programs. According to the [Product Stewardship Institute](#), publishing the books uses up 14 football fields of forest each year and only about one in three of the books are recycled.

The non-profit just released a [report card](#) on America's largest publishers of Yellow Pages directories and there is very little to brag about.

» Water

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Fourteen out of the 15 largest publishers scored poor grades for their sustainability scores. The best performer, Ohio's The Berry Company, could only manage a score of B minus.

Scott Cassel, chief executive of the institute, said the industry has taken some steps to improve its performance in the various categories it evaluates, but "overall, publishers' efforts to be more sustainable are highly varied".

"We hope that, by shining the spotlight on the best and worst performers, our report card will spur the industry to provide better information to the public and to change their practices in the most critical areas," he said in a statement.

Well, good luck with that. Here is another solution: [opt out online](#).

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