CADE — Jay Huner worries about birds. Ordinarily, he worries almost exclusively about crawfish.

The director of the University of Southwestern Louisiana’s crawfish research worries about the thin, long-legged, graceful birds that wade gingerly through crawfish ponds, occasionally dipping beaks into the shallow water, picking up a morsel of food. The picture could grace a postcard.

It’s a pastoral scene repeated throughout southern Louisiana and paints one of the familiar images of the swampy state. It’s also a scene that incenses crawfish farmers frustrated with several years of battling cheaper, imported Chinese crawfish and, now, the battle against the birds.

Wading birds, such as ibis, heron, egret and other species, are getting more and more of Huner’s attention. Their appetite for crawfish has made the colonial water birds — they inhabit colonies in watery regions — unpopular among crawfish farmers.

Huner said the birds are a problem for farmers and eventually will be for the consumer. Just how big a problem they are — or will be — is still a mystery.

Talk of eradicating some of God’s feathered creatures ruffles the feathers of every environmentalist within earshot. Eradication is currently out of the question since most wading bird species are protected by the federal government.

Norma Jean Miller and her husband, Robert, didn’t trap crawfish last year on the 40 acres outside Eunice where they rotate crops of rice, soybeans and usually crawfish.

Predation by flocks of water birds was one of the reasons.

“The birds are definitely a problem eating crawfish,” said Norma Jean Miller.

Snowy egrets and cormorants have been a nightmare on her place, she said.

Miller said the biggest problem with birds comes in late spring when the ponds are drained slowly to coax remaining crawfish, the next season’s progenitors, to burrow into the ground. Birds by the thousands feed on the crustaceans as the water level drops.

“They also knock over the crawfish traps with their long beaks,” Miller said. “Sometimes half our traps are turned over and the crawfish gone. Eventually, we’ll have to do something about this — before it’s a disaster, while it’s still just a problem.”

Larry Miller of Church Point, no relation to Norma Jean and Robert Miller, is doing something about his bird problem. But he might as well be spitting in the wind, he claims.

“From Nov. 1 to Feb. 1, I can’t leave this farm,” said Miller. “If I had a bigger farm, I couldn’t keep them off.”

Miller shoots three to four cases of shotgun shells per year to scare off the thousands of birds feeding in his 70 acres of ponds. The booming of his propane cannons, designed to scare birds away, is more annoying to his neighbors than the birds.

“It makes me feel better, but the birds are back in 15 minutes,” he said.

Huner and most people connected to the crawfish industry agree more research is needed to discern what effect wading birds have on crawfish farms.