Stunning Starlings

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What is it about the humble Starling that leads it to be viewed with suspicion by some garden birdwatchers? Is it a case of familiarity breeds contempt or does the Starling really deserve its reputation of being greedy and argumentative?

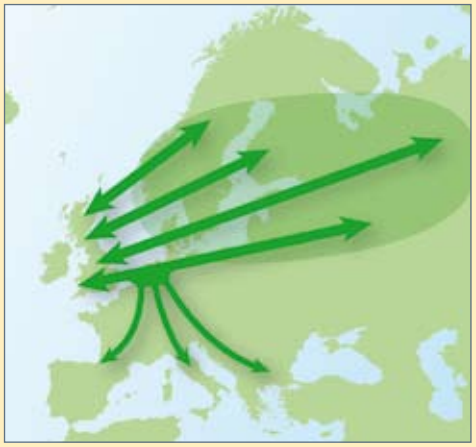
The Starling is one of our most familiar birds. Seemingly adaptable, it has managed to establish itself as part of the urbanised landscape, nesting in our roofspaces and scavenging at our fast food waste. Yet, this gregarious and sociable bird is so often overlooked or dismissed out of hand, which is a real shame because it is a fascinating species with stunning plumage.

The business of breeding

Starlings have two main requirements when it comes to breeding; a hole in which to build their nest and a nearby supply of invertebrate food. Since Starlings obtain most of their food by probing into soft ground, nests tend to be located near to areas of short grassland. The 'probing' itself involves inserting the closed bill into the ground and then opening the bill to create a small hole within which any potential prey will be exposed. Pretty much the same technique is adopted when feeding on the settling beds of water treatment works or on stone and seaweed covered beaches. Most Starlings breed in loose colonies and within these colonies individual pairs of Starlings will commandeer a range of nest holes, including nestboxes. The males can establish their breeding territories as early as January, setting up and defending a small area around the nest hole itself. Many males attempt to defend a whole series of holes in the hope that they will be able to attract a suitable female to each hole. However, the competition for nest sites is such that most males end up with just a single hole and one female.

This may seem rather opportunistic but it is worth noting that the females can be equally opportunistic in their breeding behaviour. It is quite common for a female Starling to deposit one of her eggs in the nest of another female. This behaviour is known as brood parasitism and, in order to reduce the chances that her egg will be spotted by the owner, the female may remove one of the owner's eggs and it is these eggs that are sometimes found on the ground. Removing an egg in this way ensures that the numbers still add up! The length of the Starling's breeding season is determined by the number of nesting attempts. Across much

Starlings by Steve Round. From left: juvenile Starling, immature Starling moulting through into adult plumage, adult Starling.



On the move

Our resident Starlings are joined in the winter by others from breeding populations elsewhere within Europe. Many of these visiting birds are part of an autumn fly-way that runs east to west across Europe. Birds from the Netherlands are the first visitors to arrive here in the autumn, followed by birds from Germany and southern Scandinavia. The last birds to arrive come from Poland and Russia. Interestingly, the Garden BirdWatch reporting rate increases dramatically in the autumn, highlighting the arrival of these wintering birds.

This map was taken from *Time to Fly*, a BTO book about bird migration. The book is on special offer at the moment and is available for £7.50 plus p&p. Call BTO Sales on 01842-750050 to order your copy today, or visit www.bto.org and click on ONLINE SALES.

FACT BOX

Common name:
Starling

Scientific name:
Sturnus vulgaris

Family:
Starlings

UK population:
9.5 million birds (summer)
winter numbers unknown

Conservation status:
Red listed

Migratory status:
Resident / winter visitor

Breeding:
Clutch size: 4–5 eggs
Incubates: 12–15 days
Young in nest: 19–22 days
Number of broods: 1–2
Breeding season: Mar–July
Age at first breeding: 2

Typical lifespan:
Five years

Max. recorded lifespan:
22 years, 11 months

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of southern Britain there appear to be several distinct phases to the season. The first clutches of eggs tend to be laid in a highly synchronous fashion within the colony.

Research suggests that this occurs through social stimulation, possibly with the colony's females laying their eggs in response to male song, which is itself synchronised across the colony. This synchronisation breaks down with later nesting attempts, perhaps because some of these will be made by females that have failed early on and are laying replacement clutches, while others will have reared young successfully and so are later in producing the second clutch. Starling eggs are a pale blue in colour, almost invariably without any markings and glossy in appearance.

A shifting diet

During the summer months Starlings feed mostly on invertebrates, particularly the larvae of craneflies (known to many as leatherjackets). From late summer or early autumn, the diet starts to change and the amount of plant material that is taken begins to increase within the diet. This seasonal shift is matched by certain morphological adaptations, with the Starling's intestine increasing in length. This lengthening of the intestine allows the Starling to cope with the increased amount of plant material – after all, plant material is more difficult to digest than animal matter.

This seasonal change in the length of intestine is not the only adaptation that the Starling shows to its way of life. The probing

already mentioned, favours other adaptations centred around modifications to the skull and any musculature around it. It is these adaptations that allow the Starling to push its bill into the ground and then open it. Alongside this, the Starling's eyes can be rotated forward to give the bird binocular vision, useful when it comes to spotting potential prey items.

In addition to probing for food, Starlings will actively pursue insects or hawk for them from a perch (or from the ground). They have also been recorded drinking nectar, feeding on large scraps of food, like chips or bread, and tackling small lizards and frogs. This highlights the resourceful nature of the Starling, something which may explain the way in which it has adapted to live alongside Man in some of our more urbanised landscapes.

A bird in trouble

Despite all this, Starling populations in Britain (and indeed elsewhere in Europe) are in decline, prompting concern from researchers and conservationists and resulting in the addition of the species to the red-list of Birds of Conservation Concern. The most-marked declines in Starling populations here have been seen within woodland (some 92% since 1965) but this may reflect the fact that woodland is a sub-optimal habitat for the species. The declines in farmland (especially pastoral farmland) are less pronounced (being 66% over the same period) but are nonetheless worrying, particularly as this is likely to be the habitat favoured by breeding Starlings.

Examination of BTO datasets has helped researchers to identify some of the underlying causes behind the observed declines. Data from the BTO's ***Nest Record Scheme*** suggest that Starling breeding performance has actually improved over recent decades and that the decline is not the result of changes in breeding performance. However, examination of the data from the BTO's ***Ringing Scheme*** has highlighted problems in the survival of young Starlings (during their first year of life) and (to a lesser extent) adults. These declines in survival rates are thought to have driven the declines seen here in Britain.

The reasons why young Starlings may find it more difficult to make a living are thought to be linked to changes in the nature of farmland and in the farming practices which we employ. Many of these changes may have reduced the availability of invertebrate prey, so important to these birds.

Starling by Steve Round

An urban bird

The seasonal pattern of garden use, as revealed by ***Garden BirdWatch*** observations, shows that gardens are most widely used during the first third of the year. This period covers both the early part of the breeding season and that time of the year when many of our immigrant Starlings will still be present. One of the most interesting aspects of garden use is that it is suburban and urban gardens that are more heavily used than rural ones. This pattern, also seen in House Sparrow, is in contrast to that seen for most other birds, making the Starling a true urban bird.

An aerial ballet

One feature of our Starling population during winter is the formation of large communal roosts. These can number many thousands of individual birds, coming together to roost in conifers, reedbeds and at other favoured sites. It is not so much the roosting birds that attract attention but the swirling mass of bodies that undertake a pre-roosting aerial ballet in the fading light of the winter afternoon.

Small flocks of Starlings come together as dusk approaches, coalescing into a bigger flock that wheels and pulses across the sky. As dusk approaches, part of the flock will dive down towards the chosen roost, almost as if

testing its nerve and seeing who will be the first bird to take the plunge into the roost itself.

The roost will often increase in size over time, with birds attracted in from other smaller roosts. However, the presence of so many Starlings tends not to go unnoticed and the local Sparrowhawks soon arrive to exploit the seasonal bounty of so many small birds in one place. Mind you, selecting a single Starling from the wheeling mass of black bodies will not be easy and more often than not the Sparrowhawk will fail to secure a meal.

The Starling, then, is a fascinating bird. It may appear commonplace and rather boring to some but there is a great deal to this adaptable and resourceful species. In addition, it is a striking bird to look at, its plumage full of subtle colours, delivered with a certain swagger that is worthy of attention.

How to sex a Starling

Adult male Starling by John Harding

An adult Starling is a very smart bird, although its appearance does change with the time of year. Immediately after its post-nuptial moult, the predominantly black feathers have pale tips. However, the pale tips are weak and soon become abraded, leaving the black plumage with its strong purple and green iridescence. The flight feathers have a reduced sheen and are dark brown, rather than black.

During the breeding season the straight bill is yellow in colour, with a pinkish coloured base in female birds. In males, the base is a steel-blue colour so that it is possible to sex individuals seen well. Just remember blue for boys and pink for girls. At other times of the year, the bill is dark brown or black. Young Starlings start out with a pale brown, almost sandy-coloured, plumage and a pale chin and throat. At this age it is not normally possible to tell their sex.

Adult Starling by Steve Round