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ONEIDA COUNTY**

HOME GROWN FACTS

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European Starling

First brought to North America by Shakespeare enthusiasts in the nineteenth century, European Starlings are now among the continent's most numerous songbirds. They are stocky black birds with short tails, triangular wings, and long, pointed bills. Though they're sometimes resented for their abundance and aggressiveness, they're still dazzling birds when you get a good look. Covered in white spots during winter, they turn dark and glossy in summer. For much of the year, they wheel through the sky and mob lawns in big, noisy flocks.



Cool Facts

- All the European Starlings in North America descended from 100 birds set loose in New York's Central Park in the early 1890s. The birds were intentionally released by a group who wanted America to have all the birds that Shakespeare ever mentioned. It took several tries, but eventually the population took off. Today, more than 200 million European Starlings range from Alaska to Mexico, and many people consider them pests.
- Because of their recent arrival in North America, all of our starlings are closely related. Genetically, individuals from Virginia are nearly indistinguishable from starlings sampled in California, 3,000 miles away. Such little genetic variation often spells trouble for rare species, but seems to offer no ill effects to starlings so far.
- Starlings are great vocal mimics: individuals can learn the calls of up to 20 different species. Birds whose songs starlings often copy include the Eastern Wood-Pewee, Killdeer, meadowlarks, Northern Bobwhite, Wood Thrush, Red-tailed Hawk, American Robin, Northern Flicker, and many others.
- Starlings turn from spotted and white to glossy and dark each year without shedding their feathers. The new feathers they grow in fall have bold white tips – that's what gives them their spots. By spring, these tips have worn away, and the rest of the feather is dark and iridescent brown. It's an unusual changing act that scientists term "wear molt."
- Starlings are strong fliers that can get up to speeds of 48 mph.
- In studies of starlings' sense of taste, scientists have discovered that they can taste salt, sugars, citric acid, and tannins (bitter compounds that occur in many fruits, including acorns and grapes). They can tell the difference between sucrose (table sugar) and other kinds of sugars – helpful since starlings lack the ability to digest sucrose.

Helping You Put Knowledge to Work

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- A female European Starling may try to lay an egg in the nest of another female. A female that tries this parasitic tactic often is one that could not get a mate early in the breeding season. The best females find mates and start laying early. The longer it takes to get started, the lower the probability of a nest's success. Those parasitic females may be trying to enhance their own breeding efforts during the time that they cannot breed on their own.
- The oldest recorded wild European Starling was 15 years 9 months old.

Measurements

Both Sexes

Length—7.9–9.1 in; 20–23 cm

Wingspan—12.2–15.7 in; 31–40 cm

Weight—2.1–3.4 oz; 60–96 g

Relative Size—Nearly twice the size of a House Sparrow; smaller than an American Robin

Habitat

Starlings typically live around people, using mowed lawns, city streets, and agricultural fields for feeding; and trees, buildings, and other structures for nesting. Their main requirements are open, grassy areas in which to forage, a water source, and trees or buildings that contain suitable cavities or niches for nesting. They avoid large, unbroken stretches of forest, chaparral, and desert.

Food

Starlings will eat nearly anything, but they focus on insects and other invertebrates when they're available. Common prey include grasshoppers, beetles, flies, caterpillars, snails, earthworms, millipedes, and spiders. They also eat fruits including wild and cultivated cherries, holly berries, hackberries, mulberries, tupelo, Virginia creeper, sumac, and blackberries; as well as grains, seeds, nectar, livestock feed, and garbage.

Nesting

Nest Description

Male starlings begin building the nest before mating takes place, filling the cavity with grass and pine needles, along with feathers, trash, cloth, and string. There's a depression near the back of the cavity where the cup is built and lined with feathers, fine bark, leaves, and grass. Females oversee the final arrangements and may discard some of the material the male added. Starlings also add fresh green plants to the nest throughout the nesting period, particularly during laying and incubation. Nests can be built in as little as 1-3 days. Both sexes incubate the eggs.

Nest Placement

Males choose the nest site and use it to attract females. The nests are virtually always in a cavity, typically in a building or other structure (look for them in streetlights and traffic signal supports), an old woodpecker hole, or a nest box. Starlings also occasionally nest in burrows and cliffs. Nest holes are typically 10-25 feet off the ground but can be up to 60 feet high.

Nesting Facts

Clutch Size—3–6 eggs

Egg Length—1.1–1.3 in; 2.7–3.2 cm

Egg Width—0.7–0.9 in; 1.9–2.3 cm

Incubation Period—12 days

Nestling Period—21–23 days

Egg Description—Bluish or greenish white

Condition at Hatching—Helpless, with sparse grayish down. Newly hatched starlings weigh about 6.4 grams. The eyes stay closed for 6-7 days.

Behavior

Starlings forage in lawns, fields, and other open areas with short vegetation. They wander over the ground, often quite rapidly, poking their closed bill into the ground and using their strong jaw muscles to force open the bill and search for soil insects and other invertebrates. They often forage with other species, including grackles, cowbirds, blackbirds, House Sparrows, Rock Pigeons, American Robins, and American Crows. Watching starlings in flocks can reveal several ways that these gregarious birds communicate with their neighbors. Starlings signal agitation by flicking their wings, or by staring at their opponents while standing erect, fluffing their feathers, and raising the feathers of the head. Submissive birds crouch and move away with their feathers sleeked. Confrontations can escalate into birds charging at each other and stabbing with their long bills. Birds on wires may push others away by sidling along the perch until they've run out of room. Males attract mates by singing near a nest site they've claimed and flapping their wings in circles at the same time. After they've paired, males follow their mates everywhere, chasing off other males. Starlings are extremely aggressive birds that drive other species from nest sites they want to use. Among the species they've chased off are Wood Ducks, Buffleheads, Northern Flickers, Great Crested Flycatchers, Tree Swallows, and Eastern Bluebirds.

Conservation

Populations in North America are stable. This recent and extremely successful arrival to North America is a fierce competitor for nest cavities. Starlings often take over the nests of native birds, expelling the occupants. With so many starlings around, this causes some concern about their effect on native bird populations. Nevertheless, a study in 2003 found few actual effects on populations of 27 native species. Only sapsuckers showed declines due to starlings; other species appeared to be holding their own against the invaders.

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Source: http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/European_Starling/lifehistory#top