

A USE FOR STARLINGS

Birders despise the European Starling for its violence against native cavity-nesters, its raucous habits, and its sheer abundance. Once introduced, this species swept the continent in a third of the time that it took human Europeans to do so. Both the causes and the implications of such remarkable success merit a closer look.

A privet hedge that circles our tiny yard was attacked and nearly defoliated. Although my identification skills in the class Insecta are pretty much limited to recognizing bugs that can be improved by swatting, I managed to narrow the culprit down to larvae of the moth genus *Archips*—probably *A. rosaceana*, a leaf roller. (Fall warblers getting too easy? Try insects.)

Simultaneously, several of the houses on my street were infested with starlings, by this time working on their second brood. All these plagues intersected dramatically. On June 7 I noticed a single starling walking on the squared-off top of the hedge, picking caterpillars out of their leaf-and-silk hiding places. The same bird, recognizable by its unseasonably worn plumage, was back that evening, when it fed actively for about ten minutes.

The next morning, this individual returned with two colleagues. I watched them feed, again for about ten minutes. They wandered, apparently at random, probing caterpillar shelters and extracting any larvae they found. Perhaps every fourth probe was successful, which indicated that the caterpillar population was already thinning out. One starling consumed at least thirty caterpillars, each about 1.5 centimeters long. When they left, I watched the original bird fly directly to its nest in the neighbor's eaves.

While feeding, the starlings ignored each other until nearly full, when mild squabbling broke out. But when a female House Sparrow tried to share the bounty, the nearest starling immediately delivered a solid peck to the head. The behavior of this small group exemplifies the social habits that have helped make the species such a juggernaut.

On the third morning, only the original starling returned. It fed for close to fifteen minutes this time, and had to reach farther into the hedge and down its sides to find larvae. Later, my examination of the hedge showed that caterpillars had become quite sparse. Probably two hundred caterpillars were consumed during the feeding sessions I witnessed; many hundreds more could have been eaten when I was not watching.

A useful 1933 book by Junius Henderson, *Practical Value of Birds* (New York: Macmillan), summarizes the results of tens of thousands of bird dissections by old-school ornithologists. In some two thousand European Starling stomachs, insects represented over forty percent of the total year-round contents. This figure was much higher in spring; baby starlings subsist on a diet that is nearly forty percent caterpillars.

Henderson assessed the rapidly growing starling population, then confined

to east of the Mississippi, like this: "It is capable of much good, but potentially harmful because of its gregarious habits and its propensity to increase under favorable conditions" (p. 232). This "exotic" is justly maligned for its effect on indigenous avian species and its occasional taste for fruit and grain crops. But its economic effects may well be positive on balance.

I would prefer to have my exterminating done by native caterpillar specialists like cuckoos. But my street is a busy, commercial, and probably fairly toxic environment; only the hardiest native species even try to breed along it, and I bet that no cuckoo has been here for decades.

The European Starling, however, thrives here (and elsewhere). Its success has made it a major environmental force, a status that renders it a fascinating and at times beneficial bird.

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TAKE A SECOND LOOK 1994 BOSTON HARBOR CENSUS DATES

Take a Second Look (TASL) censuses of Boston Harbor birdlife will be conducted on January 9, February 13, and March 13, 1994. TASL was started in the winter of 1980 to survey and census the bird population of Boston Harbor throughout the year, although the winter water bird censuses have been its major activity. The dates shown above were chosen to coincide with high or incoming tide during the morning. Each census starts at 8:30 AM and goes until early afternoon. A minimum of sixteen volunteers is needed for each census date. You do not have to be an expert to participate. This is an excellent opportunity to learn about the common water birds of Boston Harbor. For more information call Maury Hall (617-268-7571) or Soheil Zendehe (617-863-2392 [home] or 617-923-0941 [work]).

IN MEMORIAM

Darcy

Walk with the wind