

Starlings in the US: The Good, the Bad, the Bold, and the Beautiful

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Starlings are a uniquely intelligent invasive species that backyard birders love to hate.

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European starlings, also known as common starlings and mynas, are an Asian bird species (*Sturnus vulgaris*) that has become extremely common in the US. These highly social birds can be found across Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Pacific Islands as well. Their shimmering, iridescent black-green-and-purple plumage is dotted with light speckles; some say it resembles a starry night sky. The beaks of adult males are lemon yellow, and they have long throat feathers which give them a rough appearance.

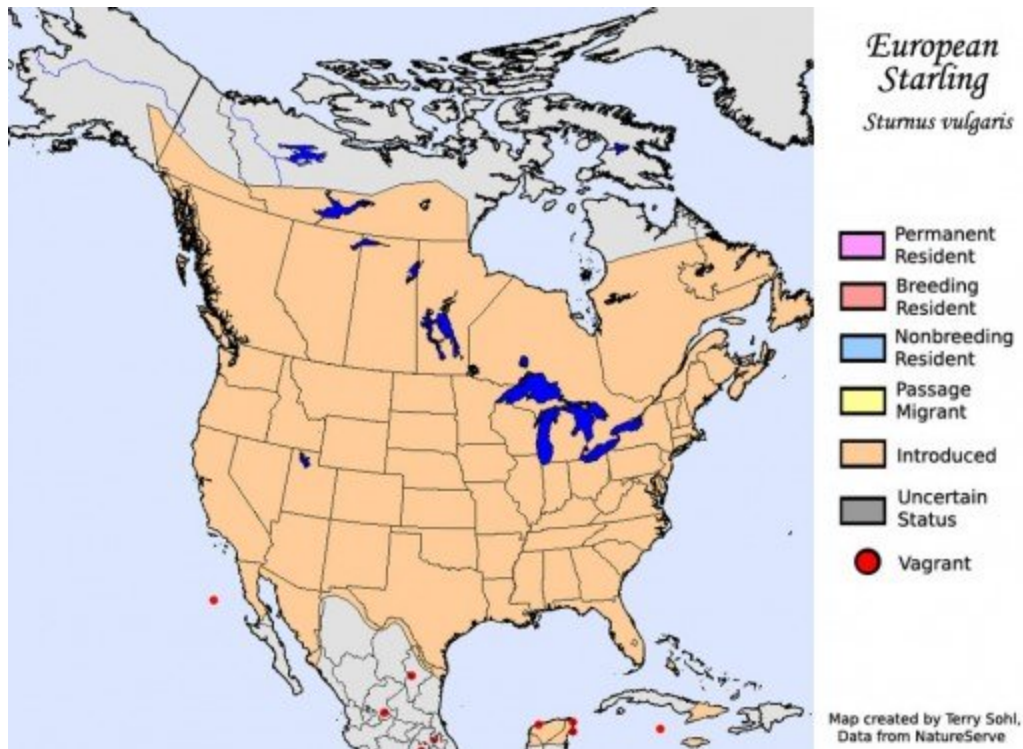
European Starling Facts

- **Species Name:** *Sturnus vulgaris*
- **Size:** 7½" to 9"
- **Geographic Origin:** Asia
- **Lifespan:** Approximately 15 years

How Were Starlings Introduced in the US?

Now considered one of the worst nuisance birds in this country, Old World starlings were purposely introduced to Central Park, New York City in 1890 by a well-meaning but misguided man named Eugene Schiefflin. The original 60 pairs that were released rapidly multiplied. Soon after, the American starling population exploded and the species spread rapidly throughout the entire U.S. and much of Canada. Starlings are known to compete with, displace, and kill many native birds and their young.

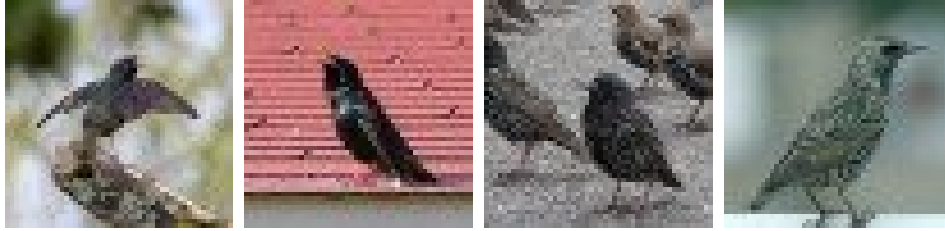
Starlings are now considered an invasive species and are despised by ecologists and birders alike. Despite their reputation, however, they do have some positive attributes.



The current range of the European starling in the US includes every continental state as well as portions of Canada and Mexico.

The Good: Pros of Starlings in the US

- They eat tons of gypsy moths and caterpillars, flies and fly larvae, and many other obnoxious insects.
- Male Starlings are gifted nest decorators and fumigators.
- Mated pairs are usually monogamous and are devoted parents.
- Starlings are talented mimics—they can reproduce the sounds of humans, other birds, and inanimate objects. I once heard a starling accurately imitate a ringing phone!
- Starlings are known for their gracefully synchronized aerial murmuration dances.
- Their iridescent feathers shimmer and sparkle with star-like dots, so there is no doubting their beauty. I admire the majesty of their "star"-covered, gleaming feathers, despite their gluttony.



The Bold and The Bad: Cons of Starlings in the US

- Their aggression and territorial takeover habits have displaced and killed off many native songbirds. They are considered invasive by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Their corrosive droppings can damage all kinds of objects and surfaces.
- They spread the seeds of weeds and eat large amounts of grain crops.
- Because of their enormous flocks, they can interfere with aviation.
- Their dominance at backyard bird feeders can push out the native bird visitors.

What Makes Starlings Unique?

Starlings have been extremely successful since their introduction to the US. They are intelligent birds who engage in a variety of unique behaviors that allow them to thrive in their environments.

They Work Together in Flocks

Flocks can number in the thousands and often move instinctively as one unit in the sky. Entire flocks swirl and change direction in flight as a survival tactic to evade predators like merlins, sparrow hawks, and falcons. This behavior is called murmuration. At dusk, smaller foraging groups join the larger flock seeking safety in numbers as they roost for the night.

They Are Strong and Noisy

Starlings will try to dominate any area they occupy and compete with native birds for food and cavity-nesting opportunities. Insects and fruit are their main food sources. On several occasions, I have seen a huge flock of starlings land on my grandparents' large lawn. They systematically poked their beaks into the soil to forage for and feast on grubs and flies.

They Are Crafty

Male starlings build nests and decorate them with flowers to attract females. To repel insects, they add fresh herbs. How smart is that? The males' mating calls vary and can include squawks, chortles, trills, and what sounds to me like someone pounding nails into a board!

They Reproduce Prolifically

If a female starling is properly impressed by a male's vocal talents and likes his floral offerings, she will promptly rip out his decorations and finish building the nest. The male is then officially accepted as her mate. The same nest will be used by the pair during the course of a breeding season to raise as many as three families. Four or more medium blue eggs are laid in the cups of soft, dried grass. Once the nestlings have hatched, both parents devote all their energy towards feeding their young.

How to Keep Starlings Away From Your Bird Feeder

If you should experience an invasion of these birds at your feeders, you have several options. It is important to discourage them from remaining in your area, as they will aggressively drive out adult songbirds and kill any baby birds they encounter in order to use the nesting spots for themselves.

- **Pause Feeding for a Few Weeks During Summer:** Without a ready supply of seeds, your nuisance birds may move on. Natural food sources are abundant, so supplemental feeding can be safely put on hold without causing any undue stress for your regular songbird visitors.

- **Install a Cage-Type Feeder:** If you keep your seeds in a cage-feeder, smaller birds with smaller beaks will be able to access them easily, but starlings will not.
- **Use an Upside-Down Suet Feeder:** Songbirds can easily figure out how to hang from and obtain food from this type of suet holder, while larger birds like starlings cannot feed from this position.



- **Use Grey-Striped Sunflower Seeds:** Starlings can crack black oil sunflower seeds, but their beaks aren't strong enough to get into grey-striped seeds. Other backyard birds will be able to crack into these seeds, but starlings will not.
- **Don't Offer Cracked Corn or Millet:** Starlings love both cracked corn and millet, so keep these items out of your feeder.
- **Remove Fallen Seeds and Husks From the Ground Below Your Feeder:** Starlings often forage for food on the ground, so keeping the area under your feeder clear may help deter them.

- **Use a Birdfeeder That Closes Automatically:** There are bird-feeders available that close automatically when squirrels or larger birds land on them. Small songbirds will still be able to use your feeder, but starlings will not.
- **Use a Tube-Style Feeder:** The short perches and close feeding ports on tube-style feeders are awkward for larger bird species. Larger groups will not be able to dine at once, and this will cause squabbles. While the starlings are competing with each other, they won't be eating your seeds.
- **Outfit Your Birdhouses With Predator Tubes:** These provide a small "tunnel" that songbirds can use with ease, but larger birds cannot enter. This prevents them from usurping the nest box or reaching the babies inside. They are forced to look elsewhere, and you'll have saved future generations of thankful songbirds.

Do You Have Starling Neighbors?

Unless you have falcons and hawks patrolling your area, you may experience these powerhouse birds. Use the above tactics to minimize their impact on your backyard bird population. Despite their aggressive takeover attitude, it is to their credit that they eat a massive amount of gypsy moth caterpillars, blowfly larvae, and other obnoxious insects. They are also attentive and devoted parents, and the murmuration "dances" they perform are truly awesome!