

## European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*



**Folk Name:** Bob-tailed Blackbird, Hog Bird, Oily-bird

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Abundant

**Habitat:** Urban areas, farmland

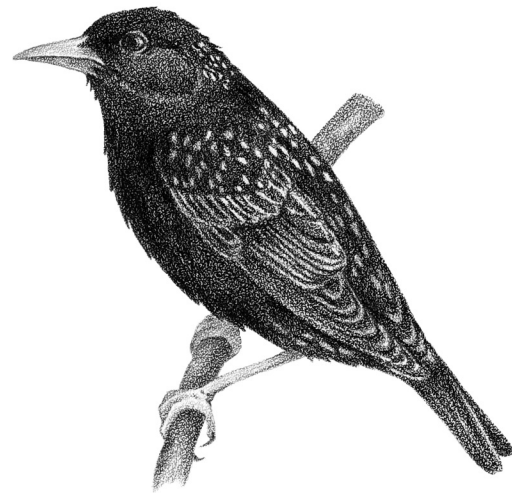
The European Starling, as might be expected, is a bird native to Europe, not the United States. It was brought here and released in the late 1800s. Many intentional and unintentional introductions were made between 1850 and 1890, but a release of starlings in Central Park, New York, in 1890 is credited as the first successful introduction in North America. Between 60 and 80 hardy birds established a small breeding population that began to spread throughout New England and then proceeded to invade the continent. The rapid spread of the starling and the House Sparrow prompted passage of the Lacey Act in 1900, which prohibited the release of foreign birds in the United States. Today, the European Starling is abundant nationwide, is considered an invasive pest species, and unlike our native birds, has no formal legal protection.

It took about 30 years for the European Starling to successfully spread from New York into the Carolinas. South Carolina's first report was a bird seen by Miss Baugham of the Kennedy Library in Spartanburg during the spring of 1918 (fide Gabriel Cannon). The first North Carolina report was in 1919: a bird that was shot in the town of Willard in Pender County. In 1921, *The Charlotte Observer* credited the first valid sighting of European Starling in Mecklenburg County to:

Morton L. Church. Southern representative of Catlin & Company. Mr. Church is a keen student of bird and animal life...Mr. Church saw two male and six female starlings, or young starlings, on Sunday morning June 12. They were disporting themselves on a telephone wire near his home in Myers Park. Mr. Church made a report of the incident to one of the National bodies that is watching the invasion of starlings in this country.

Six months later, a specimen of a starling was shot at the Mecklenburg County courthouse. *The Charlotte Observer* reported the bird:

was killed...by Deputy Register of Deeds John Moore at the courthouse when he fired into a flock of English sparrows congregated in one of the magnolia trees on the lawn, [the starling] has been stuffed and mounted and will be on exhibition in the register's office.



Elmer Brown first reported finding European Starlings in Rowan County in 1922, and Gabriel Cannon published this nesting account from Spartanburg that year:

On April 24, I saw a black bird perched on a wire. As I had a pair of glasses with me, I was able to identify it as a Starling. A moment later it dropped to a lawn and walked along in the most approved Starling style. A few days later, while talking with Dr. L.J. Blake of this city, I mentioned the event of that morning and he told me that he had a report of a black bird nesting on a trolley-pole. On May 7 we were able to get out to investigate the report and found a pair of Starlings nesting in an old Woodpecker hole.

Dr. J.E. McLaughlin (older brother of ornithologist R.B. McLaughlin) discovered a nesting pair in Statesville in the spring of 1923. In 1926, P.M. Jenness found European Starlings breeding in the towns of Rock Hill and Chester.

Elmer Brown's growing interest in this "new" species prompted a letter to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum in the summer of 1926:

One question I would like to ask you is, "How long is it before young Starlings have their mature plumage, and how long are they fed by the old birds?" On May 21, near Davidson in Mecklenburg County, I saw an adult bird with three young birds feeding in a pasture. The young birds had attained their full size and their plumage was still in the

slaty-gray stage, their beaks being of the same color. The old bird was feeding the three young ones, and they would run after it and peck it if it did not bring food to them as often as they liked. They could fly as well as the old bird. Could it have been possible that these birds were nearly a year old and still being fed by the old one? The date seems to me rather early for them just to have hatched that spring. Can you enlighten me to this?

In 1928, William McIlwaine confirmed the starling was a common year-round resident in Charlotte. On 17 January, he wrote:

The starling is getting to be very common. A pair were feeding yesterday just outside my window. I have noticed several of them this winter around the roof of the First Presbyterian Church. They are around here in the Fall in flocks.

Then, during the first week of May, he wrote: "I found this week a starling's nest in the eaves of a garage of Mr. P.S. Gilchrist. The little ones will soon be out of the nest. ... I saw a family of starlings, five. And the youngsters could fly as well as their parents."

By 1940, the European Starling and the House Sparrow were considered to be the two most abundant birds in the Carolinas. To many, these birds had become serious pests. That year, as the Great Depression was ending, Frank D. Williams of Rocky Mount, presented this idea to help control the starling population boom: "If the Starlings keep on increasing their numbers could be reduced by recommending their use as food. The bird is easily captured in its roosts at night with the aid of a flashlight. When the breasts have been properly prepared they may be used in a meat pie that is very appetizing."

Today, the European Starling is thoroughly naturalized and is one of the most ubiquitous birds in both Carolinas.

Large numbers can be found in a variety of habitats on any given day of the year. Immense winter flocks estimated to be in the tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands, have been reported moving through the Carolinas over the last 75 years.

The European Starling averages 8 ½ inches long. Breeding adults are shiny black with a purple-green speckled luster and a straight, pointed yellow bill. They are iridescent like spilled oil and in some areas they have been called "oily-birds." Non-breeding birds appear quite different as they are dull gray black with white spots and a dark bill. Starlings have a short "bobbed" tail and pointed wings. In flight, starling flocks move with a precision similar to that of massive schools of fish darting about in the sea. They can make a wide variety of calls, garbled songs, and imitate other birds and sounds. Starlings feed on the ground and eat mostly insects, some grains, and some fruits and vegetables. During World War II, one North Carolina Bird Club member wrote:

Although the Starling, introduced from Europe, has a very bad name in this country, almost as bad as the English Sparrow, the experts give it some excellent recommendations. An English authority states that "there are few more useful birds than the Starling at all months of the year, and especially in the summer." In areas where Japanese beetle has become established, the Starling has been quick to detect its presence and must be classed as one of the most effective bird enemies of that pest.

Starlings are a cavity-nesting species known for their aggressive nature and prolific breeding. They often attack native cavity-nesting birds, driving them from their nest sites. They have been known to injure or kill other birds, and they readily destroy other birds' eggs. In many areas, populations of several species, like the Eastern Bluebird, Red-headed Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, and Purple



*European Starling inspecting a nest hole. (Jeff Lemons)*



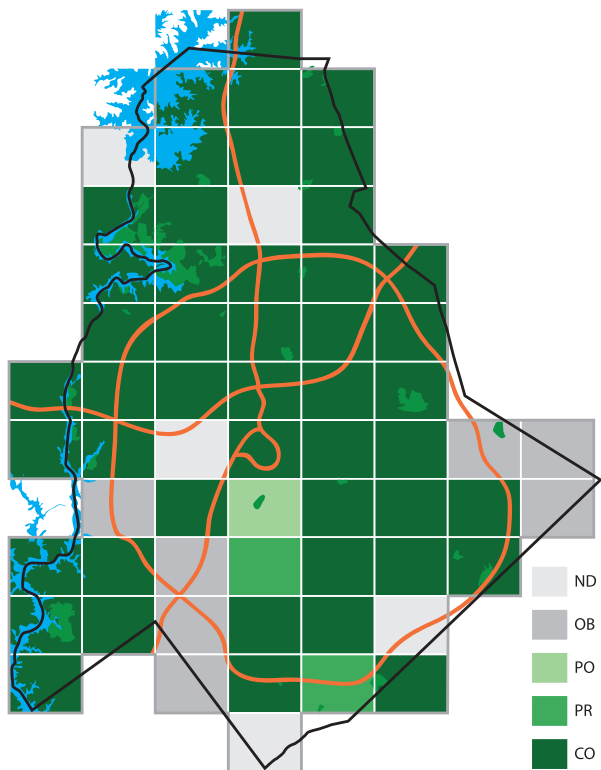
*European Starling in December. (Will Stuart)*

Martin, are believed to have declined due to competition with this European invader. This account of nesting was published in *The Chat*:

They build in natural cavities in trees, woodpecker and Flicker holes, slanting pipes, and eaves and window shutters of houses. The nest is constructed of dry grasses, straw, string, cloth, paper and feathers. The pale blue eggs number from five to seven in a set. The male bird does most of the incubating. After hatching, the young are ready to fly in three weeks. The birth rate of the Starling is higher than any of the native American birds. One pair of Starlings have been known to have three broods in one year. Late in August the birds gather in flocks numbering into the thousands to feed and roost together.

A massive mixed flock of European Starlings, Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and others was counted on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1971. The flock was estimated at 2,160,000 birds with almost a half million of the birds believed to be European Starlings. In recent years, flocks of 25,000–50,000 have been regularly sighted around the Concord Mills Mall in Cabarrus County each winter.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas observed nesting as early as February. Nests were found placed in almost any kind of crack or crevice available. Suzannah Seriff reported finding them in the tops of light poles in a restaurant parking lot and in the canopy covering the pumps at a gas station. They were found in Purple Martin nest boxes, bluebird nest boxes, and Wood Duck nest boxes. They were spotted in open ends of various pipes, cement cracks under bridges, attic eaves, and more.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/2, CO/47)*