

# Sturnus vulgaris

EUROPEAN STARLING

<b>ENGLISH NAMES</b>	European starling, common starling
<b>SCIENTIFIC NAME</b>	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
<b>FAMILY</b>	Sturnidae (Starling and Allies)



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European starlings are mid-sized, iridescent black birds that congregate in large flocks.

## RANGE/KNOWN DISTRIBUTION

European starlings are native to most of Europe and Asia, with a wintering range in North Africa. They have been introduced to North America, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Jamaica and the West Indies and their range is still increasing.

In 1890, starlings were released in New York City and have since dispersed across nearly all of North America. Starlings appeared in Canada in 1919 and were first sighted in British Columbia in 1945.

## IMPACTS ON GARRY OAK AND ASSOCIATED ECOSYSTEMS

European starlings aggressively occupy tree cavities and displace other cavity-nesting birds. Starlings have been implicated in the declines and at-risk status of purple martins (*Progne subis*) and western bluebirds (*Sialia mexicana*), and possibly Lewis' woodpeckers (*Melanerpes lewis*) of the Georgia Depression, and are also known to compete with wrens, swallows and possibly flickers.

European starlings harbour many diseases and parasites including *Salmonella*, *Toxoplasmosis*, *Histoplasma capsulatum* (histoplasmosis fungus), ticks and mites, which may be transmitted to native birds and humans.

Because they congregate in very large flocks of up to thousands of birds, body weight and droppings from roosting European starlings can damage and kill trees. Starlings can also change the structure and composition of plant communities by dispersing seeds, including those of exotic species.

Large numbers of starlings feeding on soil invertebrates can deplete this fauna.

## FIELD DESCRIPTION

European starlings are approximately 21 cm long with pointed wings and short, square tails. The iridescent, black feathers develop whitish spots in the fall that are lost by spring. Juveniles are a duller colour with

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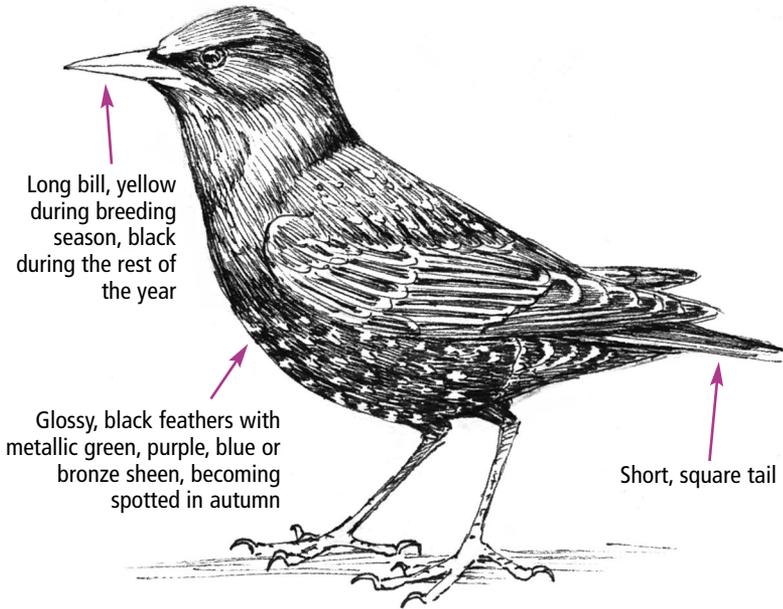


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rounder wing tips and black bills. Eggs are glossy and light blue or white and measure 2 cm x 3 cm.

## LIFE HISTORY

Invertebrates such as centipedes, spiders, moths, beetles and earthworms make up half of the diet of European starlings. They also eat seeds, fruits, livestock feed, garbage, seedlings and rarely small vertebrates such as lizards and frogs.

European starlings breed from late March to early July. Starlings nest in holes in trees, buildings or other human-made structures. They also readily use nest boxes. Nests are built from vegetation, feathers and other found objects. Starlings usually have 2 clutches of 4-5 eggs per year.

In the Georgia Depression, large winter flocks consisting of local breeders and migrants from the north and east start to gather in August. They roost in trees and buildings and can fly 25-50 km each day from roosting to feeding sites.

Predators of starlings include various species of hawks.

## HABITAT

European starlings inhabit open fields, agricultural areas, woodlands, suburbs, cities and other disturbed areas created by humans. They are usually absent from undisturbed, dense forests.

## MANAGEMENT

To discourage European starlings from roosting, begin management as soon as they begin using a site.

**Develop a long-term, realistic program for invasive species removal before undertaking any work. Before taking action, expert advice should be obtained. Please refer to the introductory section of this manual.**

**PHYSICAL CONTROL:** Sealing potential nest sites and eliminating sources of food and water are the most effective controls. Use mesh and caulking to seal all openings larger than 2.5 cm and remove European starlings from nest boxes built for native birds. Consistent removal of newly built nests will eventually dissuade starlings.

Because starlings can roost on a great variety of substrates, tactile repellents that make surfaces uncomfortable or impossible for roosting will only move the problem.

Live box trapping is labour intensive and most effective on small populations. Starlings can be trapped in nest-box traps during the nesting season or in larger decoy traps which are most useful when birds are flocking. Decoy trap designs are available from the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, online at: [wlapwww.gov.bc.ca/vir/pp/ipmweb/ipmpages/brainstorm.HTM](http://wlapwww.gov.bc.ca/vir/pp/ipmweb/ipmpages/brainstorm.HTM)

Trapped starlings should be humanely euthanised and not moved to other areas. Shooting will disperse roosting starlings but is not an effective control method.

*Refer to the introductory pages for information on hunting and trapping invasive species and for humane euthanasia guidelines.*

**BIOLOGICAL CONTROL:** Maintaining habitat for hawks and installing raptor perches can support predator populations that may help control European starlings.

**CHEMICAL CONTROL:** Permits are not granted for the chemical control of European starlings except where they pose a serious health hazard.

The hazard must be certified by the Workers' Compensation Board or the Health Board and all other suitable control methods must be tried first.

**OTHER TECHNIQUES:** Noise and visual frightening devices to deter European starlings from overnight roosting should be continued for 3-4 evenings in a row. Although they may respond at first, with repeated exposure they quickly learn to ignore the disturbance unless it is constantly changed. Ultrasonic devices are not effective.

**PREVENTATIVE MEASURES:** Bird houses for native birds can be made less attractive to European starlings by using smaller entrance holes and removing perches. Contact Naturescape British Columbia ([www.hctf.ca/nature.htm](http://www.hctf.ca/nature.htm)) for starling-resistant nest box designs.

Remove introduced berry-producing plants such as English hawthorne (*Crataegus monogyna*) and English ivy (*Hedera helix*) to eliminate potential food sources for starlings.

Reducing the extent of lawns, and allowing grasses to grow long and leaf litter to accumulate may limit starling access to soil invertebrates.

**PERSISTENCE:** European starlings have high dispersal rates and will rapidly repopulate areas after being removed.

## GENERAL COMMENTS

Starlings host a range of diseases that can infect humans. Wear masks and protective clothing when touching bird nests or droppings.

European starlings are listed as "Schedule C" animals under the Wildlife Act, which means they can be captured or killed anywhere in the province and at any time.

## REFERENCES

Cabe, P.R. 1993. "European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)."  
*The Birds of North America*, No. 48 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.

Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, M.C.E. McNall and G.E. Smith, 1997. *The Birds of British Columbia, Volume 3: Passerines (Flycatchers through Vireos)*. UBC Press, Vancouver, BC.

**For more information contact the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, or see the website at [www.goert.ca](http://www.goert.ca)**