

## THE STARLING IN MADISON COUNTY, INDIANA.

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Since the successful introduction of the English starling into America on March 6, 1890, when 80 of these birds were liberated by Mr. Eugene Scheiffelin at Central Park, New York City, ornithologists have viewed with apprehension their increase and spread. That they have come as far west as Indiana we have numerous reports to convince us; that they have taken up their abode in Madison County, Indiana, with the purpose of becoming permanent residents, the following experience of the writer will prove.

Last February 20, a friend interested in birds, living 1½ miles northwest of Pendleton, told me of a strange bird which had appeared repeatedly with a flock of English sparrows and fed with them on her driveway quite near the house. She described the bird as "larger than the sparrows, dusky gray in color, a walker, with a long, sharp bill and very short tail." Several times following this date she mentioned the continued presence of this strange bird on her premises until on the morning of April 4 she called me to say there were two of these birds, exactly alike, their bills yellow, their shiny, iridescent feathers somewhat speckled with light creamy buff, walking about the barn lot with much assurance, making frequent trips to the decayed top of a beech tree in a woodlot opposite her home.

I went out at once to see these two strangers and identified a pair of starlings busily stripping the dried blades from stalks of corn fodder lying about the barnlot. Each bird was actively engaged in this pursuit and use of the glasses easily revealed a flicker hole on the north side of the beech tree, at least 30 feet from the ground, into which the starlings were carrying the nesting material. At daylight the following morning this pair of birds was industriously prodding with their long, sharp bills into the sod of a pasture lot near the house for their breakfast, all the while keeping very close together. If by chance one worked more rapidly than the other, thus getting a few feet ahead, the one in front would pause, look back and wait until the mate caught up before proceeding further with the hunt for food. I spent the entire forenoon of April 5 observing the activity of these birds and was convinced we were to have a starling brood ere long.

May 18 much activity on the part of the pair of starlings suggested the feeding of fledglings, and about 1 p. m. the parent birds escorted six fully fledged babies, quite as able to fly as were the parents, to an apple orchard in front of the house, where it was possible to observe the feeding of the babies in response to their persistent, raucous calls for food.

The farmer on whose premises these starlings were hatched shot five of the babies and one adult on the afternoon of May 18. The skins of one baby and one adult were prepared for the report of the Indiana Audubon Society's convention at Newcastle on May 19. Mr. Sidney Esten prepared these skins and they are now in his possession. Another of the babies was presented to Dr. Amos W. Butler, a third to Mr. Samuel E. Perkins, and the two remaining were too badly torn with shot to permit their preservation.

A second pair of starlings had appeared in this same woods about two weeks before the brood of the first pair was brought from the nest. In preparation of the adult skin it was revealed that this bird was a female with a fully developed egg, light blue in color, which in all probability would have been laid that day, also five other eggs in various stages of development. I saw four starlings fly from the nest-hole after these six were killed, in all probability three adults and the remaining one of the brood of six. The development of eggs in the one adult which was killed would suggest this bird was the female of the second pair. These birds were observed by Mr. Sidney R. Esten of Pendleton, Dr. Earl Brooks of Noblesville, and Otto Behrens, Jr., of Anderson, during their nest building activities.

On June 8, 1927, I went with Mr. Esten in response to a call from Anderson, Indiana, to see some starlings which were reported there. We drove out the East Twelfth Street road toward State Road 67, and found six nests occupied by starlings in our two hours of observation. All these nests were in telephone poles on the south side of the road except one, which was in the south side of the pole on the north side of the road. We saw nine starlings, eight adults, one immature; parents carrying food into three nest-holes, while from each of three other nest-holes the head of an adult looked inquiringly at us. The average height of these nest-holes from the ground was about 13 feet. One nest, however, was easily reached by standing on a fence post; the bottom of the nest must have been 12 or 15 inches below the opening, as it was not possible to reach it by thrusting the arm into the hole.

A fitting close to this the first chapter in the history of the starling in Madison County is the following: On Thanksgiving day, November 24, 1927, Mr. Luther Day, a farmer living six miles due north of the woods in which the starling brood was hatched in May, went into his haymow at dusk to catch pigeons. While thus engaged, a strange bird flew directly toward his face, which he was able to catch and take into his home for identification. It proved to be a starling whose winter coat is beautifully metallic in shades of purple, green, rose and bronze. The tip of each feather bears its triangular marking of creamy buff, the bill is horn color, while the keen, bright eyes do not miss a motion of those who are eager to observe this stranger who has taken up his abode in our midst. This starling was brought in an ordinary bird cage to my home November 25, where it was later presented to Mr. Esten, who now has it and reports it is quite rapidly becoming tame, even eating flies and hamburger from Mrs. Esten's hand. It eats some grain, bathes frequently, enjoys the swing in a large cage which it now occupies, and is in a general way adapting itself to its new environment.

To those who wonder what the status of the starling in Indiana may be five years hence I quote the following from the experience of Mrs. Mable Osgood Wright of Connecticut, who says: "Here in Connecticut starlings were not conspicuous until 1900, but now they are a serious menace both to the summer resident birds, whose nesting sites they appropriate, and to the winter food supply of our most beneficial resident birds.

"Personally I have been watching the habits of the starlings as individuals and in flocks for the past five years, limiting myself to a two-mile radius of home, and I am appalled at the injury they inflict, both upon birds, for the starling is a great fighter armed with a strong bill, and on tree and bush fruits.

"Beginning to mate as early as February, the starlings of Birdcraft Sanctuary and my own place often raise two broods a year, it being quite usual to see the first brood following the parents about, clamoring for food, while they are busy with the second brood.

"When the second family is on the wing, the two broods with the parents form a family flock in early June, when they spend the time in visiting cherry trees, berry bushes, and grain fields until August, when the general flocking takes place.

"In the autumn they pillage the countryside of everything eatable, from grain gleaned to pepperidge berries and all other edible seeds that would form the winter food of robins and bluebirds. They also gobble the suet and other food put out on winter feeding shelves. At night they either take refuge in buildings or go in cloud-like flocks to the brushed edges of the marsh meadows, these roosts being often discovered by the fact that their droppings have seared the foliage, leaving the bushes leafless. Connecticut has done wisely in placing the starling on the list of unprotected birds, side by side with the English sparrow, but a concerted country-wide effort must be made if the starling is to be kept in check.

"Only a month ago over 500 starlings were captured in the belfry of a nearby country church, by merely placing curtains behind the slat ventilation openings and dropping them after the birds had gone to roost at night, the condition of the tower being something beyond belief.

"If starlings were but few in number, their melodious spring whistle, varied at times with a sort of muttered sound and some very startling ventriloquistic notes, together with the varied seasonal plumage, would make them interesting guests, but as conditions are they are another warning of the foolishness of importing birds to another habitat than their own. Nature resents this meddling and the innocents pay for the mistake of the rash."

