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“The bully of the bird table’: how the humble starling conquered the world



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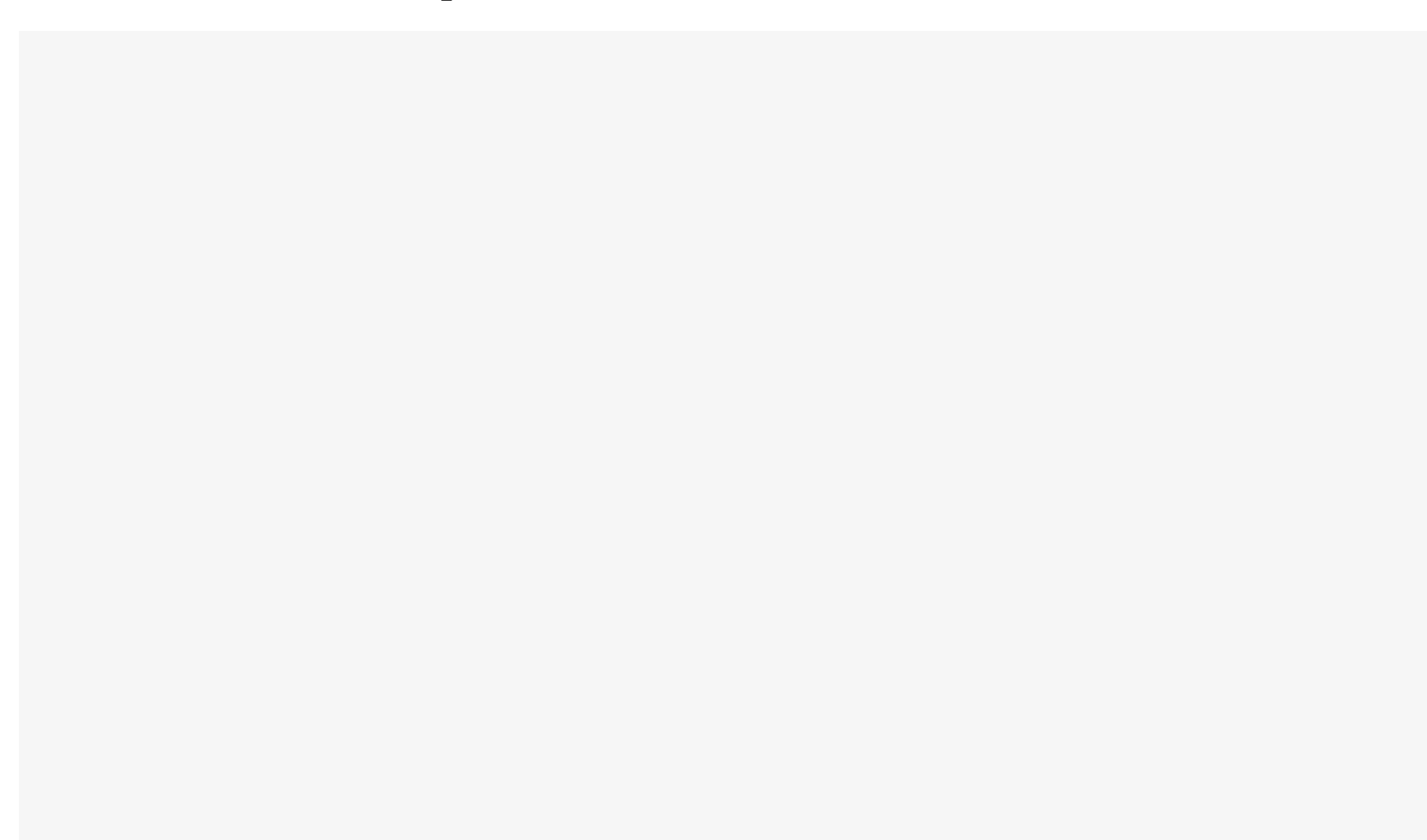
A murmuration of starlings at sunset next to Brighton Palace Pier on the south coast of England. Photograph: Philip Reeve/Alamy

Some celebrate them, others despise them. Yet this mimicking, competitive and acrobatic songbird still exerts a powerful fascination

A stream of people heads steadily down the path, towards the viewpoint over the reedbed. As I walk alongside them, I’m reminded of a crowd heading to a football match, or a gathering of medieval pilgrims hoping for a miracle.

There is usually a moment, about 20 minutes before sunset, when the gathering falls strangely silent, anticipating what we are about to witness. Then, just as some are wondering if they’ve come to the wrong place, or on the wrong day, the **first birds appear** in the far distance. A small flock of starlings, flying determinedly in our direction. A collective sigh of relief ripples through the crowd. We can relax.

A **starling murmuration** is one of the most impressive natural spectacles on the planet, yet one that many people can enjoy close to home. Piers in Brighton and Aberystwyth, Albert Bridge in Belfast, Gretna Green and the Exe estuary are just some of the locations where we can witness this daily event, from November through to February, before the birds head off to breed in northern Europe and Siberia.



A common starling. Photograph: Imagebroker/Alamy

The largest and best-known murmuration occurs near my Somerset home, on the Avalon Marshes. This haven for nature, created from former peat diggings, once held gatherings of as many as seven million starlings. More recently, because of population declines, and milder winters allowing the birds to stay the other side of the North Sea, numbers have fallen to a mere half a million. Nevertheless, this is a remarkable sight.

Yet we remain deeply ambivalent towards the starling. Bill Oddie noted their reputation as “the bully of the bird table”, while another observer likened them to secondhand car salesmen, because of their unusually swaggering walk. No other British bird is simultaneously reviled and celebrated; depending, it seems, on whether we are looking at one or two starlings, or thousands of them.

A closer look at an individual starling reveals some striking qualities. The plumage - which from a distance appears black - is actually a subtle blend of greens, browns and purples, with pale spots and, during the breeding season, an iridescent sheen. The song, while not exactly tuneful, is a complex interplay of rattles, whistles, warbles and buzzes, interspersed with what sounds like static from an analogue radio. The starling was once described as “the one-man band of the bird world, with no particular tune to play”, which sums it up rather well.

Starlings are also gifted mimics: impersonating telephone ringtones, car alarms, referees’ whistles and even the sound made by falling bombs during London’s blitz. Admirers of their musical skills included Samuel Pepys, who wrote of “a starling which doth whistle and talk the most and best that ever I heard in my life”.

Mozart was another early fan, keeping a pet starling and, when it died, holding a solemn funeral procession in its honour. The bird might even have inspired him to write his Piano Concerto No 17 in G Major, which contains several familiar, whistle-like sounds.

Meanwhile, starlings - whose native home is Europe and western Asia - have conquered the rest of the world, having been introduced into Australia, New Zealand, South Africa (by none other than Cecil Rhodes) and the Pacific island nation of Fiji.

Today, the starling is not only one of the most widespread and successful species on the planet, but also one of the most reviled, because of its negative impact on native bird species. Nowhere is this more true than in North America, where they were introduced in the late 19th century.

One fine March day in 1890, a wealthy New Yorker named Eugene Schieffelin released a flock of 60 starlings, brought across the Atlantic by ship from England, into New York’s Central Park.

Within a few decades their descendants had spread across the entire continent. Today the starling is one of North America’s most common birds, with as many as 140 million individuals - almost half the entire world population. But because they destroy crops, and outcompete some native species, they have become America’s avian public enemy No 1.

The blame for their presence has been placed squarely on Schieffelin himself, with special ridicule reserved for his infamous plan to introduce every species of bird mentioned by Shakespeare into North America.

Now, however, doubt has been cast on this oft-repeated tale. In 2021, environmental humanists John MacNeill Miller and Lauren Fugate provided irrefutable evidence that starlings were in fact introduced into the US and Canada almost two decades earlier. And the idea that Schieffelin was - motivated by his love of the Bard did not surface until 1948, almost half a century after his death. The story, it seems, is an early example of an urban myth.

Back on the Avalon Marshes, more and more starlings are arriving, their numbers building until they fill the darkening sky, performing astonishing - aerial acrobatics. Then, as the flock passes over our heads, their wings momentarily make a soft, whooshing sound - the origin of the word - murmuration - before they plummet into the reedbed. The whole event lasts just 20 minutes or so, after which the birds chatter noisily before settling down to sleep.

As dusk falls, and the crowds head back to the car park, we share a collective sense of wonder. We have briefly enjoyed a few special moments with a bird that was once taken for granted, scorned and despised, but is now being redeemed. We are finally learning to appreciate starlings for what they are: common, yes - but never commonplace.

*Stephen Moss is an author and naturalist based in Somerset. His latest book is [The Starling: A Biography](#) (Square Peg, £14.99), **also available from the Guardian Bookshop***

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