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***Sturnus vulgaris*** (Linnaeus)

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# *Sturnus vulgaris* (Linnaeus)



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**Scientific Name:** *Sturnus vulgaris*

**Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS):** [179637](#)

**Other scientific names appearing in the literature of this species:**

**Common Name:** European starling, English starling, blackbird

**Distinguishing Features:**

Adults in breeding plumage are iridescent black, with green and purple reflecting in good light. The bill is yellow and the legs are a dull red. In fresh fall plumage, feathers are tipped with white giving a speckled appearance; the bill becomes brownish. European starlings have a straight, pointed bill which is not robust or conical as it is in blackbirds, but long and flat. The tail is short and square, the body is stocky, and the wings are short, broad-based, and pointed. Immature starlings are gray-brown above, paler below with some white on the throat and belly, and a brown bill (Sprunt, 1954; Forbush, 1955; Burleigh, 1958; Lowery, 1960; Imhof, 1962; Scott, 1987). Starlings have a series of musical whistles they use, as well other notes which have been described as coarse, harsh, squeaky and rattling (Lowery, 1960; Imhof, 1962; Chapman, 1966). In addition they are masterful at imitating the calls of other birds, such as the bobwhite, killdeer, eastern wood pewee, and eastern meadowlark (Sprunt, 1954; Lowery, 1960; Imhof, 1962; Kaufman, 1996). Starlings typically do not hop but walk (Lowery, 1960; Chapman, 1966).



Photo by John Slivoski

**Similar Species:**

**Biology:**

European starlings are among the most successful of North American invaders. They are common throughout the United States and thrive in disturbed areas such as around farm lands and in suburban areas, where seasonally they form huge flocks (Burleigh, 1958; Kaufman, 1996). They are also common in

coastal areas near salt water (Imhof, 1962) and have been reported to roost in large numbers in marshes (Forbush, 1955). They tend to be rare in undisturbed areas (Kaufman, 1996). They form large flocks, especially in the winter, and are frequently observed in association with blackbirds and grackles (Sprunt, 1954).

**Reproduction and Fecundity:** Nesting typically begins early in the spring (Forbush, 1955). Males establish territories and attract females through song and display. Males build the nest in an available cavity (usually a natural hollow, or an abandoned woodpecker nest) and line it with twigs, weeds, grass, leaves, trash, feathers, and similar debris (Allard, 1940; Sprunt, 1954; Forbush, 1955; Imhof, 1962; Kaufman, 1991). Females participate in nest building. Typically 4-6, rarely 7, greenish white to bluish white eggs are laid (Sprunt, 1954; Imhof, 1962; Kaufman, 1991). The eggs measure 28.75 by 21.25 mm (Sprunt, 1954). Eggs are incubated between 11 and 14 days (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970). Both parents participate in incubating eggs and feeding the hatchlings (Allard, 1940; Kaufman, 1996). Young leave the nest about 21 days after hatching (Allard, 1940; Kaufman, 1996). However, they may follow the parents for some time after leaving the nest and continue to beg for food (Allard, 1940). Females have two, rarely three broods per year (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970).

**Trophic Interactions:** European starlings feed mostly on insects and small invertebrates, such as grasshoppers, beetles, flies, caterpillars, spiders, snails, and earthworms, as well as berries, fruits, seeds, and grains, and occasionally visit flowers for nectar (Kaufman, 1996). Mulberries, blackberries, elderberries, bayberries, Virginia creeper, poison ivy, and sumac have been reported as favored plant items (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970). Nestlings are fed mainly animal matter (Allard, 1940; Forbush, 1955). Starlings forage mostly on the ground in open short-grass areas, such as lawns and pastures (Allard, 1940; Burleigh, 1958; Imhof, 1962; Kaufman, 1996). They also follow cattle or sheep in farm areas, feeding on the insects that are stirred up or on ticks the mammals possess (Forbush, 1955). Other food items include fruits from trees and vegetables (for which they are considered pests) and flying insects (Allard, 1940; Forbush, 1955; Kaufman, 1996).

### **Maximum Size:**

This species typically grows to between 187.5 and 212.5 mm in length (Sprunt, 1954; Forbush, 1955; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970). Wingspan is about 387.5 mm. Tail extends between 62.5 and 68.75 mm (Sprunt, 1954).

### **Distribution:**

This species naturally occurs in western and central Europe, breeding from Norway and northern Russia, south to France and Italy. It winters south to northern Africa and Syria (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970).

Starlings are established in all five Gulf states (Scott, 1987; Kaufman, 1996).

### **Interest to Fisheries:**

### **Current Status of this Species in the Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem:**

Several attempts were made to introduce this species into the United States between 1850 and 1900 (Imhof, 1962). The first successful introduction consisted of approximately 60 European starlings released in Central Park, NY. in 1890 (Sprunt, 1954; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970; Lowery, 1960; Imhof, 1962). Eugene Scheiffelin is the person believed to be responsible for the introduction (Chapman, 1966; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970). He was also among those who introduced the house sparrow to North America (Chapman, 1966). Another 40 specimens were introduced a year later (Lowery, 1960; Chapman, 1966). These 100 starlings rapidly multiplied and expanded their range in all directions. By 1917 stray specimens were reported in Savannah, Georgia. By 1918 starlings were reported to have made it as far south as Florida (Sprunt, 1954). Presently their numbers are in the millions and they are common throughout the United States and Canada (Lowery, 1960).

The first record of European starlings in Florida comes from a specimen collected on Amelia Island, January 24, 1918 (Bailey, 1925; Howell in Sprunt, 1954). Other early records for Florida include 4 specimens observed at Lake Jackson, Leon county in 1924, an unspecified number of specimens reported from Jacksonville and St. Augustine in 1925, 4 birds taken at Wakula Beach in 1926, a flock of approximately 150 birds reported from Ferry Pass, Escambia county in 1929, a small flock reported near Gonzalez in 1929, 4 birds reported near Bunell that same year, and a flock of 8 birds observed on St. Johns River between Sanford and Osteen in 1931 (Howell in Sprunt, 1954). An unconfirmed record taken in 1931 exists for Florida City, near Homestead in extreme southeastern Florida (Sprunt, 1954). The first report of nesting in Florida came from Pensacola in April of 1932 (Weston in Sprunt, 1954). Nesting in Florida expanded southward to Kissimmee by 1946 and to Orlando by 1949 (Sprunt, 1954).

The first record of starlings in Alabama was made in Montgomery in 1918 (Imhof, 1962). Nesting was first reported at Anniston and Auburn in 1930. The first specimen collected on the Gulf coast of Alabama was shot from a flock of

approximately 20 in December of 1932. Starlings have been permanent residents along the Alabama Gulf coast at least since 1942 (Imhof, 1962).

This species was rare in Louisiana until 1930-31 and 1931-32 when several small flocks were reported in the winter. In the winter of 1932-33 the size of the flocks increased dramatically. Thousands of individuals were reported to have covered the parade grounds of Louisiana State University. Winter numbers increased gradually until nesting began sometime between 1933 and 1937. In the summer of 1938 a large nesting population was reported in downtown Baton Rouge and in the vicinity of the University (Lowery, 1960). Presently starlings are common throughout the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi and in Ship Island for the Mississippi Sound barrier islands (Toups and Jackson, 1987). European starling numbers still tend to increase in the winter towards the south of the Gulf states as well as along the Gulf coast where starlings fly to escape lower temperatures (Imhof, 1962; Toups and Jackson, 1987).

### **Potential Impacts:**

European starlings are aggressive birds, and have been known to compete with native species for nesting holes (Bailey, 1925; Sprunt, 1954; Burleigh, 1958; Lowery, 1960; Imhof, 1962; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970; Scott, 1987; Toups and Jackson, 1987). One species which has been affected is the red-headed woodpecker. Lowery (1960) reported European Starlings to have taken over dead snags in City Park Lake and New University Lake, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which traditionally were occupied by red-headed woodpeckers. This author reported red-headed woodpeckers were harassed into abandoning newly created nests to starlings. Imhof (1962) similarly reported starlings to "wait for a woodpecker to complete an excavation and then gang up on the owner, forcibly evict him, and take over the hole". Bailey (1925) and Burleigh (1958) reported starlings also drive away other species such as bluebirds, flickers and crested flycatchers from areas surrounding their nests. Starlings may attack established nests of other species destroying the eggs (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970).

Another negative aspect of this species is its habit of roosting in large numbers. Starlings constitute a nuisance when they roost because of the noise produced and the damage caused to public and private property by their droppings (Sprunt, 1954; Lowery, 1960). Estimates of damage to property in Washington, D.C. alone has ranged in the hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly (Lowery, 1960). In addition, starlings cause damage in agricultural areas. They have been reported as serious pests in cherry and corn plantations (Forbush, 1955; Burleigh, 1958; Imhof, 1962; Tyler and

Kannenberg, 1980). They also dig up seeds in planted or sowed fields, and feed on sprouts of garden vegetables and flowering plants (Forbush, 1955; Burleigh, 1958; Imhof, 1962).

On the positive side, starlings have received praise for feeding on insects regarded as pests (Burleigh, 1958; Chapman, 1966; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1970).

### **Recommendations:**

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