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NATIONAL SURVEY OF BLACKBIRD-STARLING ROOSTS

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The 1969-70 nationwide winter inventory of blackbird-starling roosts and populations was conducted during the period December 20-January 31 by the Division of Wildlife Research, U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. The Patuxent Wildlife Research Center coordinated the survey for the East (31 States), and the Denver Wildlife Research Center for the West (17 States). Success depended on extensive cooperation from many sources: Bureau agencies, especially the Division of Wildlife Services; other Federal and State conservation and agricultural departments; the Audubon Society; ornithological clubs; and individual bird students.

In all, 674 roosts were reported—262 in the East and 412 in the West. The total estimated population was 340 million birds: 267 million blackbirds and starlings in the East and 73 million in the West. The national population was composed of 10 species, about as follows: 40 percent red-winged blackbirds, 20 percent starlings, 20 percent common grackles, 15 percent brown-headed cowbirds, 3 percent Brewer's blackbirds, and 1 percent rusty blackbirds; the other 1 percent included boat-tailed grackles, yellow-headed blackbirds, tricolored blackbirds, and bronzed cowbirds.

Of the 262 roosts reported in the East, 77 were classed as major (a million or more birds each) and 57 as large (hundred thousand—million birds each); these 134 roosts contained 265 million of the 267 million blackbirds and starlings reported in the East. Of the 412 roosts in the West, 24 were major and 41 were large; these 65 roosts contained 70 of the 73 million Western birds reported. Thus, 98½ percent of the U.S. blackbirds and starlings found were in 199 roosts (101 major roosts and 98 large roosts), or in 30 percent of the 674 reported roosts.

Descriptive information on the roosting site was given in about 97 percent of the 674 roost reports. Wetland habitat was indicated in 52 percent (58% in the West, 38% in the East) of the instances in which roosting cover was reported, and upland habitat was designated in 48 percent (62% in the East, 42% in the West) of the roosting cover listings. Marsh (cattail, phragmites, mixed), swamp thicket (willow, cottonwood, shrub), and canebroke made up the wetland habitat, while brush, hardwoods, and conifers were the categories of upland habitat. In addition to the vegetative-cover roosts, about 11 percent of all reported roosts were located in man-made structures (buildings, bridges); these were small starling roosts, nearly all with populations less than 10,000 birds.

The reporting for the 1969-70 survey was uneven in both the East and West, as would be expected in a cooperative inventory of such magnitude. Excellent coverage was obtained in Arkansas (30 roosts, 46 million birds), Missouri (47 roosts, 28 million birds), Texas (144 roosts, 53 million birds). Had the effort in all States equaled that in these three States, we believe that the survey totals for last winter would have been some 15 percent higher, a conservative estimate based on roost data of the past decade.