

Let's Blame it on Shakespeare!

Rough and Tough Birds

by Grover Brinkman
Columbia, Illinois

Fictional stories about interplanetary invasions at the moment fill the fantasy magazines. But one devastating influx into this country in 1890, truth and not fantasy, has been sorely overlooked. It is the story of how the English starling came to America, to develop into one of our problems in winged creatures.

Odd as it may seem, every one of the uncounted billions of starlings in America today have descended from a mere one hundred birds that a New Yorker brought over from Europe and released in Central Park in that city. The man who imported the starling was Eugene Schieffelin, a drug manufacturer. Schieffelin was an admirer of Shakespeare, and his desire was to introduce in America all of the birds Shakespeare mentioned in his writings. So he had chaffinches, English sparrows, skylarks and starlings sent here.

Today, because of the lessons we thus

learned, no foreign bird or animal can be brought to our shores without examination and permission from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The skylarks and nightingales that Schieffelin brought here soon died but not the starlings! They survived the frigid Eastern winters and multiplied. Today we have untold millions. In fact, the starling is one of a very few birds in America that has grown into a problem. In a century, the starling has spread from coast to coast, has even invaded Mexico and the far north. In some areas of the U.S. it is a menace to other birds, for it is both a nest robber and a killer.

The starling is tough physically and can survive the most rigorous of winters. On farms and ranches it hovers among the cattle, eats any kind of food, and has a cunning that is almost unbelievable. In summer it follows cattle much as the cowbird does, living

off the small insects disturbed by the animals' grazing. It is so muscular that it can out-fight and out-fly most of our other birds.

When Schieffelin turned loose his starlings in Central Park at New York, the first pair to nest chose an alcove under the eaves of the Natural History Museum. So, really, the American Museum had the rare honor (or dishonor) of housing the first pair of starlings in America.

The prolific bird is one of the first to nest in spring, and raises not one but two broods each season. Usually there are five eggs in the nest.

Soon after the starling was imported to New York, neighboring cities began to report the strange bird. In the following years it appeared in Boston and Philadelphia, finally crossed the plains of the Midwest to the west coast. As they advanced they made inroads on many other birds, the flycatchers, bluebirds, swallows and purple martens.

People decided there were too many, and made war on them. But to no avail. They bred faster than they could be killed. Today we have so many they might top the national debt.

But there are always two sides to a coin, and this is also true of the starling. It is not all bad. It has a tremendous appetite, and it appeases its hunger



Photo by Grover Brinkman, Columbia, Illinois

This back yard, with its many bird houses, was the home of hundreds of purple martens. Then the starlings came and the smaller martens abandoned the area.

with various insects, such as grasshoppers, crickets, army worms, beetles and spiders. In Africa the starling is protected, because when a locust plague grips the land, the starling moves in.

The bad side of the bird is easy to see. They are noisy, can mimic at least twenty birds, fly in huge flocks and roost in trees. A flock of starlings, for instance, can strip a cherry tree with ripe fruit in a single afternoon. There is a health hazard as well, for their droppings often spread disease, especially in animals.

The man who loved Shakespeare really started something when he imported all the birds the bard loved. Like Johnsongrass, the starling proliferated too fast for human control. Only in time, scientists believe, will nature's balance be restored and the starling will find its level.

Mr. Schiefflin, what a "prescription" you handed out to America! ●

Nominations Submitted To Committee For U.S. First Breeding Awards

The following species of birds have been submitted to the Avy Awards Committee for a possible U.S. First Breeding award. If you have any knowledge through personal contacts or through literature searches on previous successful breedings of these species, please contact Dale R. Thompson at 16425 Placerita Canyon Road, Newhall, California 91321. (805) 252-3441.

All young must have been weaned and be self-sufficient. Hatch dates have been included with these successful breedings.

U.S. First Breeding Award Nominations submitted throughout 1985

1. Java Hill Mynah, *Gracula religiosa* May 6, 1984
2. White-winged Parakeet, *Brotogeris v. versicolorus* May 2, 1985
3. Chestnut-breasted Rock Bunting, *Emberiza tabapisi* . March 9, 1985
4. Long-tailed Parakeet, *Psittacula longicauda* June 6, 1985
5. Common Trumpeter, *Psophia crepitans* May 25, 1984
6. Toucan Barbet, *Semnornis ramphastinus* Oct. 15, 1984
7. Jamaican Yellow-billed Amazon, *Amazona collaria* . . . July 4, 1984
8. Lesser Vasa parrot, *Coracopsis n. nigra* July 29, 1985
9. Gros Beak Starling, *Scissirostrum dubium* Feb. 17, 1984 ●



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