STURNUS VULGARIS, Linn.

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Starling.

Sturnus vulgaris, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 77.

—— *varius*, Wolf & Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., tom. i. p. 208.

—— *solitarius*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 18 (young).

—— *guttatus*, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. i. p. 595.

Turdus solitarius, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 834 (young).

THE distribution of the Starling over the British Islands is very general, but it is more plentiful in some counties than in others. The northern position of the Orkneys and Hebrides does not deter it from breeding there almost as abundantly as in some parts of Scotland, England, and Ireland. In selecting a site for the purpose of incubation it confides in the poor as well as the rich for protection during the performance of that important duty, making itself equally at home among the castellated towers of the Sovereign and on the tiled roof of the humblest cottager. It also builds its carelessly constructed nest under the eaves of churches, in the rain-pipes of the wayside inn and other country-houses, in decayed walnut-trees, in the deserted holes of Woodpeckers, or in the precipitous sides of a chalk-pit. On a summer morning, Starlings may often be seen perched, sentinel-like, on the crown of a weather-cock or on the letters indicating the points of the compass; later in the day they may be found among the cattle in the field, or sitting on the backs of sheep in the pasture. In winter such situations are partially, if not wholly, deserted, and both old and young are flocked together and engaged in seeking their daily food in the field, the meadow, and on the sea-shore; in the evening these flocks form assemblages so vast that, were I to attempt to estimate the number of birds comprised in any one of them, I should be considered to be dealing in the marvellous; I therefore leave such assertions as will be found hereafter to others, remarking at the same time that I fully believe them to be correct. In England many wonderful sights in connexion with the congregating of birds may be seen by visiting their places of incubation, their banquetings and evening meetings. The number of Rooks at Tregothnan, spoken of in my history of that bird, of Rock-birds at Handa and St. Kilda, of Gannets on the Bass Rock, or the Crag of Ailsa, are as nothing compared to the prodigious assemblages of Starlings at their roosting-places on a December evening in many parts of England. These social gatherings have been very fully described by many British authors; and some of their accounts are given below. Besides being generally dispersed over the British Islands, the Starling is also found in all parts of Europe, from Lapland to the shores of the Mediterranean, but is more numerous in Holland and similar low countries than in mountainous ones. I question if it be not an inhabitant of Africa, from north to south; of its northern half it certainly is, and also of Madeira, the Canaries, and the Azores. I believe that it also frequents many parts of India. In the temperate portions of Russia, in Amoorland, China, and Japan our veritable Starling is likewise said to occur. A lengthy chapter might be written on the changes of plumage which the bird undergoes between youth and maturity. The transformations may be termed wonderful; for so different is the youthful state from that of the adult that the young bird has been described as distinct under the name of the Solitary Thrush (*Turdus solitarius*). The uniform brown plumage which led to this error, however, is retained but for a short period, a month or so at furthest from the time it leaves the nest.

The second moult, which is complete before autumn arrives, is characterized by the feathers being spotted with white on a blackish ground; and truly beautiful are the birds at this period. This plumage, with a purplish black beak, is carried over the ensuing year, as I have had abundant proofs from numerous specimens I have killed in the second summer of their existence, when they certainly do not breed, and frequently remain flocked together when the old yellow-billed and brilliantly coloured birds are carrying on the task of incubation.

The flight of the Starling is straight and vigorous; and when a flock is sporting in the air, they perform many graceful evolutions, sweeping, dipping, and turning with rapidity and ease. These movements would appear to be preconcerted; for otherwise a clash of wings, and the utmost confusion would be the result, while, on the contrary, they are performed with the utmost regularity—the dark cloud of birds instantly changing their position by a concerted plan, only known to themselves. On the ground the Starling is quick and nimble in all its actions; pert and inquisitive, it turns its head and pries into every tuft of grass and every crevice or hole in which insects or their larvæ are likely to be found. When a flock visits the mead or waste, it moves quickly from one part of the field to another; those foremost in the van finding abundance of food, and leaving little behind them, the hinder birds are constantly rising, and pitching in front, until the whole field has been examined; and the amount of good they must do the farmer, the husbandman, and the country at

large is, in my estimation, immense, feeding, as they almost exclusively do, on wireworms, larvæ of all kinds, grasshoppers, worms, flies, and insects generally.

It may fairly be asked if the vast hordes of this bird seen in autumn and winter are all natives of our islands, or are partly composed of accessions from the Continent. I have no hesitation in saying that the latter is the case, and that these winter visitants migrate again in spring to the countries they left in autumn; the circumstance of numbers being killed by flying against the lighthouses on our coast tends to confirm such an opinion. When the Starlings are frozen out in the northern parts of the British Islands, as is frequently the case, they seek the warmer portions of Devon and Cornwall, and usually find shelter there; but should those counties also be visited by rigorous weather, they die by hundreds. During my visit to Tregothnan, during the very severe month of January 1867, the Starlings perished in great numbers; and every Missel Thrush and many of the Redwings and Fieldfares also fell victims to the rigours of the season. It was no unusual sight to see Starlings lying dead in tens or even twenties round the farmsteads, and in still greater numbers in the belfries of the churches in which they had sought shelter. It is not a little singular that, although the Starling is so abundant in Cornwall during the winter months, few, if any, stay to breed in that county.

"From and after the autumnal migration, and all through the winter months," says Mr. Rodd, "until the return movement in the spring we are visited in the west of England by vast flights of Starlings, which disperse in flocks of varying numbers over the open fields during the day, wheeling to and fro, from field to field, and occupying themselves in feeding until the approach of twilight, when they all unite in various-sized companies, and repair to their roosting-ground, which, in the absence of plantations, is in osier-beds, rushy bottoms, amidst flags, sedges, &c. Where, however, as in this locality, at Trengivainton and Trevethoe, a few plantations of young firs, evergreens, &c. are sparingly dispersed, it is a sight of no ordinary interest to see the almost uninterrupted stream of these birds pouring in from sunset to dusk, forming at last a countless mass which literally fills the plantation. When the day breaks, the birds disperse in small flocks in various directions until they again reunite in the evening. Previous to this grand assembly settling down to roost, they take wheeling flights round and round their haunts, sometimes presenting the appearance of a huge black cloud."

With reference to the immense flocks assembling in the evening, Bishop Stanley says:—"At first they might be seen advancing high in the air like a dark cloud, which in an instant, as if by magic, became almost invisible—the whole body, by some mysterious watchword or signal, changing their course and presenting their wings to view edgeways instead of exposing, as before, their full expanded spread. Again, in another moment, the cloud might be seen descending in a graceful sweep, so as almost to brush the earth as they glanced along; then once more they were seen spiring in wide circles on high, till at length, with one simultaneous rush, down they glided with a roaring noise of wing till the vast mass buried itself unseen, but not unheard, amidst a bed of reeds; for no sooner were they perched than every throat seemed to open itself, forming one incessant confusion of tongues."

"Any traveller from Norwich on the Yarmouth line," says Mr. Stevenson, "on looking towards the river, near Brundall station, between seven and eight o'clock on a summer evening may see the Starlings making for Sarlingham broad; where in some places so great are the numbers that nightly assemble that the reeds are literally trampled down with their weight. To those at all interested in the habits of birds, I know few sights more likely to excite wonder and admiration than the regular arrival of the Starlings from all quarters to any particular broad. Mr. J. G. Davey tells me, 'One night I watched a single flock, which appeared to extend over about *five acres*, as they were wheeling round, when another mass came from the south-west; I can form no estimate of the number; the former flock I considered large till these came; they also circled round and joined the others. They settled down in the wood in two parties, and occupied about *thirty acres*.'"—*Birds of Norfolk*, vol. i. pp. 249, 250, 251.

Nuneham Park, near Oxford, is one of the roosting-places of the Starling. The birds have taken up a position in the fine Pinetum therein, adding nothing to the beauty or to the sweetness of that charming spot; nevertheless the very estimable owner, the Rev. William Vernon-Harcourt, permits them to remain in peace. Probably the congregation which there assemble is formed by all the Starlings of that portion of the valley of the Thames and its tributaries.

The Plate represents a male and a female in their breeding-plumage, with their brood of young, all of the natural size.

STURNUS VULGARIS, Linn.

Young.

Gould, John. 1873. "Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris* [Pl. 53-54]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323943>.

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