

European Starling

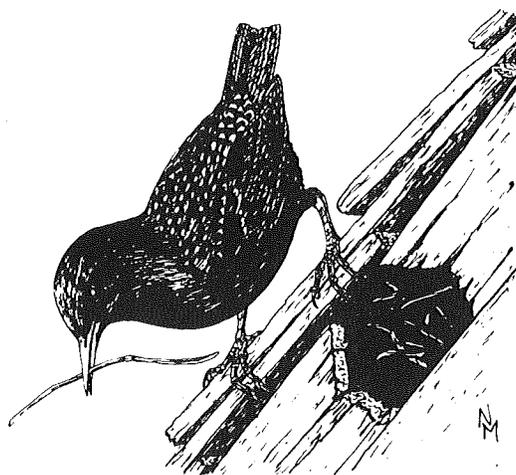
Sturnus vulgaris

The European Starling was introduced to North America in New York City's Central Park when 60 birds were released in 1890 and 40 in 1891; from this small number have descended the hordes now extant (Bent 1950). The European Starling inhabits most of the U.S. and southern Canada to south-east Alaska. The species was first recorded in Vermont in December 1913, in Bennington (Ross 1927).

During the Atlas Project starlings were recorded as breeding widely in Vermont, being absent from only 12 of the priority blocks. They were least widespread in the Northeast Highlands and East Central regions. They are widespread in Vermont year-round. Although the European Starling winters throughout its North American breeding range (Kessel 1953), many individuals apparently migrate to the middle states for the winter. Starlings frequently gather in large flocks after the breeding season, and are common around lowland farms and villages during the winter.

The starling inhabits rural farming districts, towns, and cities, but not heavily forested regions. It is a cavity nester, and individuals may frequently be seen in their favorite holes in dead American elms in open fields and fencerows. They frequently will occupy flicker-excavated holes. They will also nest in any convenient cavity on a building or other man-made structure. The nest may be 0.6–18.3 m (2–60 ft) above the ground, but is usually 3–7.6 m (10–25 ft) up (Bent 1950). As cavity nesters, starlings compete with Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Sparrows, and Purple Martins for nest sites; they may compete with Great Crested Flycatchers as well (Bent 1950). In Burlington and West Haven, Vermont, Atlas Project workers observed starlings competing with Red-headed Woodpeckers.

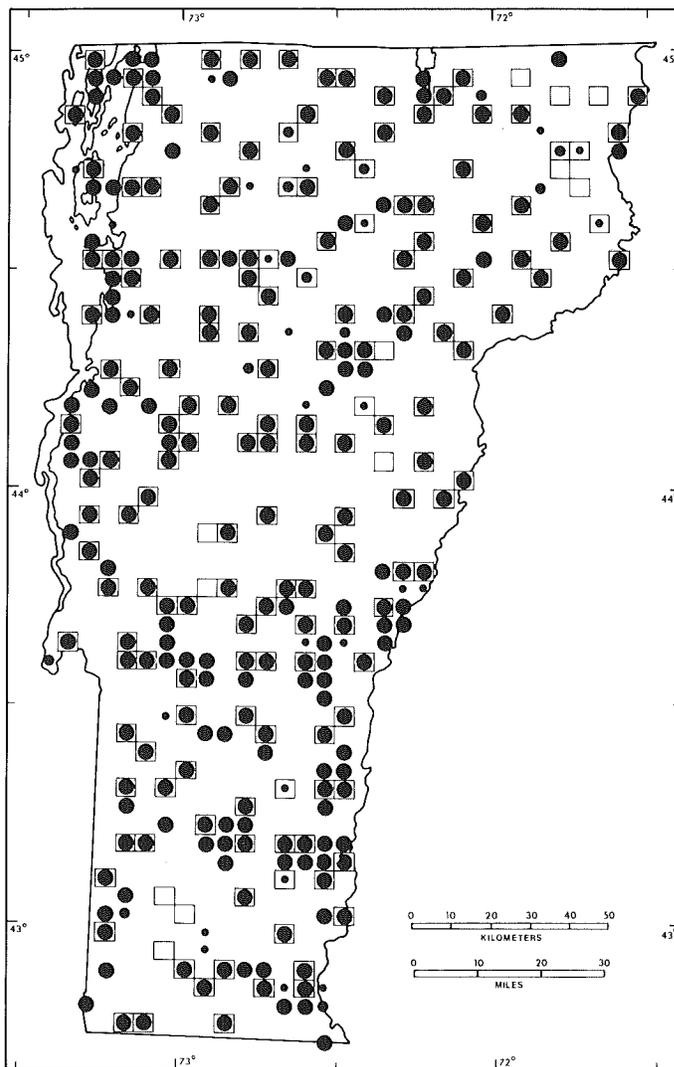
Males claim nest sites in the autumn or winter and advertise to potential mates with a vigorous crowing display (Kessel 1957).



The first stage of the nest, built by the male, includes dead leaves, coarse and fine grasses, and straws; sometimes rootlets, small twigs, and bits of cloth, paper, string, and other trash are added. The final touches are added by the female, who lines the nest with finer pieces of grass or feathers. The size of the nest conforms to the size of the cavity, with the inner cup usually about 7.6 cm (3 in) in diameter. The nests are slovenly, unkempt, and filthy, containing the excrement of the young, whose stay in the nest is usually long (Bent 1950).

The starling usually lays 4 or 5 eggs. They are ovate to elliptical. The color is very pale bluish or greenish white with a slight gloss. Nests with eggs have been observed in Vermont from April 26 through June 30 (14 records). The period of incubation is 11 to 14 days, usually the latter (Bent 1950). In Vermont, 30 nests with young were seen from May 23 to July 18. The incubation duties are shared by both sexes. The young remain in the nest for a period of 2 to 3 weeks, until they can fly well. The total nesting cycle lasts about 40 days.

The nestlings are fed by the parents largely on insects. Two broods are usually raised each year, sometimes three. After fledging, the young join others to form huge flocks of gray-plumaged juveniles. In Vermont recently fledged young have been recorded from June 8 to July 25.



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 167 (93%)
 Possible breeding: 7 (4% of total)
 Probable breeding: 5 (3% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 155 (93% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	18.5
Green Mountains	49	91	29.3
North Central	18	95	10.8
Northeast Highlands	11	69	6.6
East Central	18	95	10.8
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9.6
Eastern Foothills	24	100	14.4

About 57% of the starling's food is animal matter and 43% vegetable. Most animal food is consumed in April (91% of the diet) and May (95%). Insects constitute about 42% of the total diet. Vegetable food consists of cultivated and wild fruits (cherries being favored), berries, grain, and seeds. Most of the starling's feeding habits benefit human agriculture: it is an effective enemy of the clover weevil, and also destroys cutworms and Japanese beetle larvae (Terres 1980). Starlings frequently search the ground for their insect food (Bent 1950).

Although the European Starling remains an abundant breeding species in Vermont, populations in the northeastern U.S. have

declined slightly in recent years (Robbins 1982b). As reforestation of Vermont continues, the starling may have to adapt to a woodland life-style. The current distribution indicates that European Starlings are already adjusting well.

GEORGE F. ELLISON