



Common Starling

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The Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (Figure 1) is one of the most invasive bird pests worldwide, having established populations in many countries outside its natural range. It occurs naturally in Europe and Asia and introduced populations occur throughout North America, South Africa, Argentina, Polynesia, New Zealand and eastern Australia (Figure 2). Once introduced to a location they can colonise surrounding areas, including offshore islands. In 1863, starlings from England were first released in eastern Australia, where they are now widespread.

The first starling recorded in Western Australia was in 1936 when a single bird was observed and removed at Gingin. Since 1971, individuals and small flocks of starlings crossing into Western Australia via the Nullarbor Plain have been controlled by the Department of Agriculture and Food.

Small populations of starlings have become established in the south-east of the State near the towns of Munglinup and Condingup. These birds are subject to continual control work that has two aims: to prevent an increase in starling numbers and colonisation of other areas, and to achieve the eventual eradication of starlings from Western Australia. Starlings have also been recorded in other parts of the State, such as the Cadjebut mine in the Kimberley region.



Figure 1. Common Starling in breeding plumage (photo by Blickwinkel / Alamy).

Description

Starlings are small to medium-sized birds with males and females similar in appearance. They have distinctive glossy black feathers with an iridescent green and purple sheen. From a distance they can look plain black. In autumn after moulting, the new feathers have pale tips, which give the birds a spotted appearance. However, by spring these tips have worn and the birds appear glossy

black again. The beak is blackish in colour for most of the year, but yellow while the birds are breeding. Young birds (seen spring/summer) are a dull mouse-brown colour (Figure 3). When they moult to adult plumage in autumn they have a patchy brown and black appearance, often with some pale spotting.

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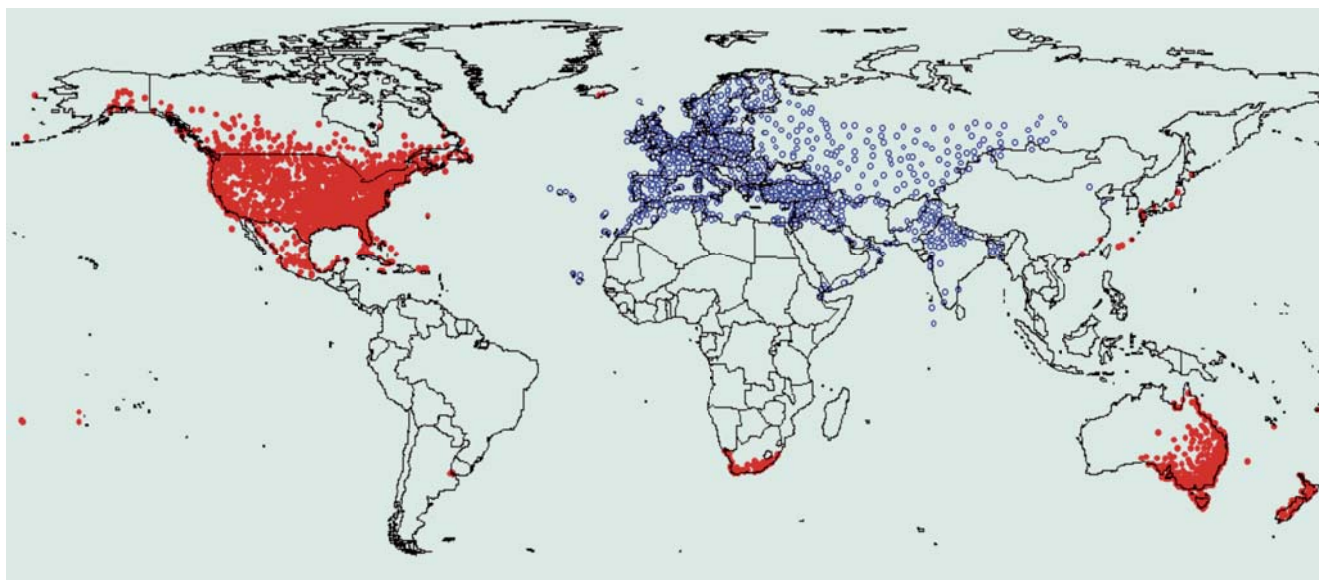


Figure 2. Worldwide range of the Common Starling with natural populations in blue and introduced populations in red (map by Win Kirkpatrick using CLIMATE software).

Habitat

Common Starlings are strongly associated with human-disturbed habitat such as farmland and cultivated areas. However, they can also live in a wide range of rural and urban habitats including open country or grasslands, wooded regions, swamps, parks, towns and cities.



Figure 3. Common Starling feeding a youngster (photo by Penny Roots).

Behaviour

Starlings are aggressive, social birds and can form very large flocks that move, feed and roost together (Figure 5). On the ground, they walk jauntily or run rather than hop like many other birds.

They are often associated with livestock and can be seen perched on the backs of animals or on the ground among grazing stock (Figure 4). Starlings are also proficient songbirds and they can mimic the calls of many other birds.

Diet

Starlings have a varied diet that includes insects, spiders, seeds, grains, fruit, livestock feed and food waste. They need to eat insects to breed successfully but plant food is also readily consumed.

Starlings feed mainly on the ground where they pick food items off the surface as well as probe into the soil with their strong beaks. They also pick food items off vegetation, catch flying insects and pluck whole or pieces of fruit from trees and vines. Newly sown seed is uncovered and eaten from paddocks. Starlings prefer short grass when foraging and grazed pastures provide ideal feeding sites.

Reproduction

Starlings can breed across a wide range of habitats. In Australia they breed from July through to March and they can have up to three broods per year. Nests are built in any available cavity, often in tree hollows or buildings and are made of dry grass combined with assorted other material, including twigs, leaves and feathers. Four to five light-blue eggs are laid, which hatch after 13 days. The young remain in the nest until three weeks of age.

Damage by starlings

The starling is a significant economic pest overseas and in Australia, causing severe damage to high-value fruit crops, especially cherries and all varieties of grape.

They consume and spoil livestock feed, affecting intensive cattle, pig and poultry production. They also disperse weeds by spreading viable seeds in their droppings and when they regurgitate food.

Starlings often live in close association with people and are the cause of considerable nuisance. The constant, high level of noise generated by large roosting flocks is disturbing to people living nearby. Garden trees, outdoor furniture, footpaths and motor vehicles are damaged and soiled by the birds and their droppings.

Accumulated wastes of starlings are a disease risk as they provide a breeding ground for organisms that cause illness in humans.

Property, industry and infrastructure can be seriously damaged when starlings use manmade structures as roost and nest sites. Work areas become unsafe and unpleasant for people and considerable cost is incurred to remove starling wastes.



Figure 4. Common Starlings feeding among stock in eastern Australia (photo by Tina Bentz).

Risk assessment

Starlings represent an extreme risk to the economy, environment and community of Western Australia. A scientific risk assessment conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Food confirmed that the starling has extreme potential for widespread establishment in the State and to become a significant pest. An analysis of the economic impact of starlings to Western

Australia showed that it was cost-effective to prevent the widespread establishment of starlings.

The starling has the potential to impact on the State's biodiversity by competing for tree hollows with native birds such as the Western Rosella. In eastern Australia, starlings may have reduced the breeding success of native parrots and in North America they have had negative impacts on some native bird populations.

Status and management

Under legislation administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food, the Common Starling is a declared pest in Western Australia. No starlings can be imported or kept anywhere in the State and any found are removed.

Identifying starlings

Although starlings are distinctive in appearance they can sometimes be confused with similar-sized native species that use similar rural habitats. A guide to identifying Common Starlings (Figure 6) summarises key differences to look for between the starling, the Dusky Woodswallow, Yellow-throated Miner and Purple-crowned Lorikeet.

Further information

Sightings of starlings should be reported to Freecall 1800 084 881 or by emailing info@agric.wa.gov.au.

Additional information can be obtained by visiting www.agric.wa.gov.au.



Figure 5. A flock of Common Starlings in flight (photo by Sabine Jensen / NatuVision.com).

Figure 6. Differences to look for between the Common Starling and three similarly sized native species (Source: Handbook of Western Australian Birds – Volumes 1 and 2, Johnstone and Storr, 1998; 2004 Western Australian Museum).

Appearance	Key differences
	<p>Common Starling (photo by Blickwinkel / Alamy). Length 19–22 cm. Weight 38–80g. Plumpish or stocky, dark-coloured bird with a short square tail, and a straight, pointed bill. (See earlier discussion for more detailed description.)</p> <p>Dark, stocky looking bird, usually in groups and often around livestock. Flies fast with rapid wing movements interspersed by short glides. Flocks are often seen wheeling and turning quickly in tight silent groups. This is one of the ways in which starlings can be recognised at a distance.</p>
	<p>Dusky Woodswallow (photo by Kevin Vang). Length 17–19 cm. Weight 33–35 g. Compact bird with dark, greyish-brown body. Chubbier looking than a starling, with shorter legs and bill. Tail is long.</p> <p>Obvious white edging to wings and tail. Bill is short and blackish in colour. Flight is graceful but rapid, interspersed with periods of gliding. Has a soft <i>chi chi</i> in-flight call. Often seen in communal huddles or side by side along a tree branch.</p>
	<p>Yellow-throated Miner (photo by Tony Crittenden). Length 23–27 cm. Weight 53–61g. Medium-sized honeyeater. Mostly pale, grey-brown body with white rump and underparts. Has short, rounded wings and a longish tail.</p> <p>Noisy, gregarious and aggressive to other birds. Frequently visits water troughs to drink and bathe. Bright yellow skin above and behind eye, bill yellow. In flight, they usually follow each other in a line and do not form tight flocks like starlings do. Loud, harsh alarm call, <i>tew-tew-tew</i> or <i>teu-teu-teu</i>.</p>
	<p>Purple-crowned Lorikeet (photo by John Milbank). Length 16–18 cm. Weight 42–50g. Small green parrot (larger than a budgie) with largish head and a pointed, stubby tail. Has a small purple patch on crown and orange on forehead and cheeks.</p> <p>Usually only seen when flying in small-to-large flocks as not easily seen at close range. Flocks can resemble those of starlings in that they fly and turn quickly in a tight group. Unlike starlings, lorikeets can be heard calling ‘<i>zit</i>’ or ‘<i>tsit</i>’ continuously when in flight. Flight is swift and direct with rapid, whirring wing beats.</p>

Endorsed by the Department of Environment and Conservation, Birds Australia Western Australia Branch, South Coast Natural Resource Management Inc., the World Wildlife Fund and Western Australian Museum.