

# Birds

## Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)



Length 21.5-22cm. Weight 75-90g. Plumage blackish with green and purple iridescence, especially in summer. In winter the body feathers become tipped in white giving a speckled appearance. Juveniles are dull brown in summer but moult in autumn to adult plumage. Starlings are distinguishable from Blackbirds at all times by their shorter tails and triangular shape of wings in flight. Their chattering mimicking song often sounds like several birds and can imitate other species, or even telephones or car alarms.

### Distribution and Habitat

The UK has a resident population and also a large number of winter immigrants from Northern Europe and North West Russia. Starlings are commonly seen, usually in groups, in both urban and rural areas where they feed. In Winter they generally roost communally in very large numbers (many thousands of birds) in woods or reed beds. In the past, roosts have developed on buildings in city centres, but these large city centre roosts have now become less common as the Starling population is declining. Numbers in the UK fell by 66% in the 25 year period 1974-1999, and the species is now on the 'Red List' of birds of conservation concern. It was removed as a 'pest species' from the General Licences in England in February 2005.

### Biology

Nests can be built in holes in trees or buildings, in loft spaces, and in nest boxes. Nests are made from grass and lined with feathers, wool or moss. More nesting materials can be piled on top of a previous year's nest, so they become very large and untidy where space is not limited. The area around the nest entrance is usually streaked white with droppings. 4-6 pale blue eggs are laid in early April and incubated by the female for 11 to 15 days (av. 12.2). While breeding the parents roost in, or close to, their nest-site. Fledging takes place after 21-23 days. Soon after becoming independent of their parents, in May, first brood juveniles join communal roosts, leaving the parents to rear a second brood. Starlings have a lifespan of about 5 to 7 years.

# Birds



*Starling nest in loft space*

In the breeding season Starlings are mainly insectivorous, leather jackets (larvae of Tipulidae – Daddy Long Legs) forming a large part of their diet. Invertebrates continue to be eaten in summer but where soft fruits are available they become an important food source, especially for juveniles. In winter, Starlings are omnivorous, eating invertebrates, grain and stock feed and they also scavenge food scraps and feed at refuse tips. Starlings will fly considerable distances (up to about 50Km) to feed. Regular flight lines are used between feeding sites and roosts.

Most Starlings roost communally from late Summer until the following breeding season, and the resident British population is augmented at this time by large numbers of Winter visitors from Northern Europe. They form conspicuous gatherings at dusk. Their flying behaviour as they go into their roosts can be spectacular. Hundreds of thousands of birds may be present in a large roost and the noise and fouling produced is considerable.

## Management

### Proofing

Starlings are fairly small and agile birds. Sprung wire and Daddi Long Legs are not effective against them. Some spike systems with appropriate installation techniques can sometimes deter them, though installation of 28mm mesh netting or weldmesh is the only sure way to proof against them.

### Scaring

Scaring, using distress calls in conjunction with other loud noises and bright lights, can be very effective at moving Starlings on from winter night roosts. Managed scaring systems, using distress calls as the main technique, have also been found to be effective at dispersing summer resident Starlings from daytime feeding areas. Predator birds have been used successfully to disperse them from structures such as pylons.

### Control

Starlings are no longer listed as 'pest species' on the public health and safety General Licence in England, so control of the birds for these reasons is no longer legal without a Special Licence. Starlings can still be controlled for reasons of health and safety in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and under the air safety General Licence in England.

Culling of Starlings is not normally a viable option as they are usually in huge numbers when they are causing problems. No commercial Starling traps are available.