

## European Starling

This medium-sized, mostly black bird lives all over the U.S. year round. ESs are probably seen here in groups at different times, usually more abundant during winter. They are a chunky, 9-inch-long bird, with a 14-inch wingspan. When flying, wings are short and have a triangular shape. During breeding season, ESs are glossy black with purple iridescence and with pale yellow spots on their back and wings. The beak is sharp, long, and yellow. In non-breeding plumage, they are brightly spotted everywhere. Males and females are similar.

Starlings turn from spotted and white to glossy and dark each year without shedding their feathers. The new feathers they grow in fall have bold white tips—that's what gives them their spots. By spring, these tips have worn away, and the rest of the feather is dark and iridescent brown. It's an unusual changing act that scientists term "wear molt."

All the European Starlings (which began as natives of Eurasia) in North America descended from 100 birds set loose in New York's Central Park in the early 1890s. The birds were intentionally released by a group who wanted America to have all the birds that Shakespeare ever mentioned. It took several tries, but



eventually the population took off. Today, more than 200 million European Starlings range from Alaska to Mexico, and many people consider them pests. They usually can be found around towns, in populated areas, and around agriculture in varying size flocks. Very large roosts, exceptionally up to 1.5 million birds, can form in city centers, woodlands, or reed beds, causing problems with their droppings. Only sapsuckers show declines due to starlings; other species appear to be holding their own against the invaders. The ES is now found worldwide.

Males start building nests in a cavity, filled with grasses and feathers, with females helping at the end. During courtship, the male sings and flaps its wings. Four or five eggs hatch in 12 days. Both male and female incubate the eggs. Helpless nestlings mature and fledge in 24 days. Young may be fed another week or two by its parents. Food consists mostly of insects but includes snails, earthworms, spiders, fruits and berries, livestock feed, and garbage.

Starlings do not have a great voice, but they can mimic up to 20 birds or sounds. The oldest recorded wild European Starling was 15 years 9 months old.

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—Pam Henline