

# Starlings viciously aggressive

By ART BRIGGS JUDE  
A few weeks ago as we watched some remaining crabapples disappear to a horde of hungry starlings, we were reminded of another way in which these alien birds compete with our native species.

In the early days of their introduction, starlings were looked on with favor in many circles. Studies made and stomach contents examined showed this aggressive new bird to be a superior insect destroyer to the robin or the catbird.

In fact Bulletin No. 808 issued by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture in 1921, advises this bird be protected except in extreme isolated cases of local crop damage.

However, at the time this assessment was made, the starling had not realized its full potential in North America. The fact is that when this publication was released, starlings had only been reported as far west as Lake Erie and were being sighted in many places in New York State for the very first time.

In the years that followed, as the starlings quickly colonized one area after another, many observers began to voice their concern.

Stop the starlings people cried as they immediately launched shooting and trapping programs

to control their spread. By then the main objections to this chunky newcomer were all too obvious. It was taking over the traditional nesting holes of bluebirds, flickers, and other cavity-dependent native birds, and was swarming into orchards with disastrous results.

This flocking trait also posed a potential threat to certain evergreen groves and windbreaks wherever the noisy birds took up a winter roost.

At the Jack Miner goose sanctuary in southwestern Ontario, starlings roosted in such huge numbers their droppings overfertilized and finally killed all the pines in the plantation.

Stopping the starling as those at the Miner Reserve found out was a formidable undertaking.

Hundreds of thousands of starlings were shot there and trucked away in an unsuccessful attempt to save the trees.

In other places the story was much the same. The European starling, first reported breeding in Ontario at Burlington in 1922 was here to stay.

Among the many control methods advocated at that time was one by the same U.S. agency that only a few years before had endorsed the bird.

It was a long range plan designed to prevent the starling's eggs from hatching by setting out

the lids of large metal drums near known nesting sites.

These shallow trays were then covered with old crankcase oil and bait such as corn was spread on the surface. As the starlings fed, some of this oil would cling to their legs and breast feathers.

Later at the nest, this oil would come in contact with the eggs and stop the embryo development.

However, any effect this method had on controlling the starling was of a local nature and with the birds quickly moving in from the surrounding countryside, it was soon abandoned.

Today, the starling in this country continues to increase wherever it can find holes in trees and

crevices in buildings to raise it's young.

People putting up nest-boxes to relieve the bird housing shortage should remember to keep the holes no larger than 1½ inches to prevent the starlings from entering.

Of course, this is not possible with purple martin houses and wood duck nest-boxes where other methods to deter these pests have to be employed.

And the sinister side of the starling is only evident when you see it devouring the last stands of persistent berries in the spring.

Wild fruit that the hard pressed bluebirds and other arriving migrants need when confronted with a persistent wet cold spell.

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