

## *European Starling (Sturnus vulgaris)*

A skilled mimic introduced from a love of Shakespeare.

In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare wrote, "I'll have a starling taught to say nothing but 'Mortimer,' and I'll give it to him to keep his anger still in motion." That line resulted in a North American starling population that numbers approximately 200 million.

Starlings are common in urban areas and are often seen in flocks of hundreds. Their nests, usually in holes in trees or buildings, are stuffed with vegetation, feathers and other assorted objects. The female birds usually lay four or five eggs per year. The starling is a member of the mynah family and is a skilled mimic. Its usual voice is a mixture of gargles and squawks, but it can also mimic other birds including predators like the Bald Eagle.

### **Impact on Communities and Native Species**

The European Starling is a notorious competitor and will aggressively lay claim to bird nesting sites, kicking out the resident birds and their eggs. They compete with native birds for space and food, but also carry disease, ticks and mites that can spread to native birds and even humans. Starlings are a threat to farmers since flocks of birds can wipe out fruit crops. Fruit growers in the Fraser Valley and Okanagan have been plagued with starling flocks.

### **Invasion History**

In 1890, a theatre fanatic released 60 starlings into New York's Central Park. His dream was to introduce into North America all of the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's work. After several failed attempts at introduction, starlings survived and spread across most of the continent. The birds are native to Eurasia and were first sighted in British Columbia in 1945. They have since expanded to most of the province but are most common in urban environments in south and central BC.



### **Identifying Characteristics:**

- approximately 21 centimetres long
- glossy black feathers with a metallic sheen
- feathers become duller and spotted with white in autumn
- short, square tail
- pointed beak, yellow during the breeding season (late March to early July) and black the rest of the year
- juveniles dull in colour with rounded wing tips and black beaks
- eggs light blue or white, 2 centimetres by 3 centimetres
- on the ground, starlings walk rather than hop