

BIRDS SIGHTED AT 27,000 FEET OVER BIRMINGHAM (CONT)

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EUROPEAN STARLINGS, STURNUS VULGARIS,
HAVE IMPRESSIVE REPERTOIRES

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In the spring of 1977 I had the opportunity to observe at close hand the singing and mimicking abilities of a European Starling, Sturnus vulgaris, that took up residence in a bluebird house just outside my bedroom window. No amount of gesturing, shouting or rock throwing discouraged his determination to take over the box, so I gave in and made the most of it by observing his courtship activities.

Every morning I awoke to a constant garble of unmusical squawks, squeaks, rattles and whistling notes, but I soon came to realize that in between the squawks and whistles was hidden an impressive repertoire of low pitched, but high quality imitations.

I eventually listed 15 imitations of bird songs and sounds and other animal calls from this one individual. These included the following: Green Heron (Butorides striatus), Red-shouldered Hawk (Buteo lineatus), Common Bobwhite (Colinus virginianus), Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americanus), Common Flicker (Colaptes auratus), Eastern Kingbird (Tyrannus tyrannus), Tufted Titmouse (Parus bicolor),

American Robin (Turdus migratorius), Eastern Meadowlark (Sturnella magna), Common Grackle (Quiscalus quiscula), Brown-headed Cowbird (Molothrus ater), American Goldfinch (Carduelis tristis), the whistling of dove wings and the call of a leopard frog (Rana pipiens).

After incubation ^{was} got underway and the young hatched, singing and displaying tapered off. As the young grew older, they became noisier and noisier until one morning I noticed a dead silence and no activity around the box. That afternoon I spotted the head of a gray rat snake (Elaphe obsoleta) looking out of the hole, which explained the silence. The snake stayed in the box for several days digesting its meal and eventually disappeared. The male Starling made occasional visits to the box for several weeks thereafter, but did not sing or display and dared not get close to the box.

In addition to some of the imitations already mentioned, another Starling that occupied a box in front of the house gave good imitations of a Chuck-will's-Widow (Caprimulgus carolinensis), Blue Jay (Cyanocitta cristata), Eastern Pewee (Contopus virens) and White-throated Sparrow (Zonotrichia albicollis). A third male occupying still another box gave imitations of a Killdeer, Common Flicker, Eastern Blue-bird (Sialia sialis), Common Grackle, and leopard frog.

Most of the species imitated tended to be those that produced squawks (Green Heron), squeels (Red-shouldered Hawk), squeaks (Common Grackle), and whistles (Common Bobwhite, Tufted Titmouse, sound of dove wings, etc.). But some imitations were entirely different and demonstrated the Starling's wider range of capabilities as a mimic (Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chuck-will's-Widow, leopard frog).

All total the three males produced 20 imitations of bird songs and other animal sounds, all easily recognizable and of good quality. It is doubtful that

Starlings will every replace the extroverted and vociferous Mockingbird (Mimus polyglottos), but they are none-the-less accomplished mimics in their own right.

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HOUSE WRENS, TROGLODYTES AEDON, ATTEMPT
NESTING IN JACKSONVILLE

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While running one of my training routes through Jacksonville in May, 1981, my attention was drawn to a musical babbling which immediately struck me as "different" from the familiar background of bird song in the Jacksonville area. A quick investigation confirmed my suspicion that it was a House Wren, Troglodytes aedon, which I found perched atop a bluebird house loudly and energetically proclaiming his occupancy and claim on the territory.

This discovery initiated a methodical census of Jacksonville which turned up two more singing males on territory, all in the southwest, or mill section, of town.

All three birds sang incessantly throughout the summer, from May through August, and all constructed dummy nests. Two chose birdhouses for their nests, which they defended actively and aggressively against bluebirds (Sialia sialis) and House Sparrows (Passer domesticus), and the other used the open end of an old clothes line pipe.

Despite their success in establishing territories and securing dummy nest sites, none of the birds was