February 2026: Starlings and drugs

Noisy, gossipy and messy, bullies on the bird table, still so common they are often regarded as pests, starlings are beautiful birds if you but look closely. The iridescent, glossy, shifting purple-to-blue-to-green colours of the plumage change as your angle of view moves, and result not from reflection but from the refraction of light through barbules, the tiny hooks that bind together, like Velcro, the vanes of their feathers. Half a rainbow in one bird.

Starling, the name, though, comes from the constellation of star-like white dots and arrow-heads scattered across this dynamic dark background.

If they weren't so common, I'm sure we'd take more delight in them.

Sad to say, however hard we look, we colour-blind humans are still missing out on a lot. The 'black' of starlings is because their feathers don't reflect visible light. If you were a starling, however, like many other birds, you would be able to see ultraviolet light, and your fellow starlings would be brighter and more highly coloured in a way we can only guess at even with clever camera technology, and boy and girl starling would be easily distinguished.

The starlings' song is a composition of whistles, clicks, warbles and screeches, or as Pam Ayres put is:

> *We don't go in for this singing all day*

And twittering about, we just squarks.

They also click their beaks, as in Richard Aldington's 'Round Pond':

In the budding chestnuts
Whose sticky buds glimmer and are half burst open
The starlings make their clitter-clatter
And the blackbirds in the grass are getting as fat as pigeons.

Mozart had a pet starling (he arranged a very fancy funeral and wrote a requiem poem for it when it died), and he wrote down its song in his notebook in 1784 with the remark; "Das war schön!" The notes are very similar to the opening of his piano concerto No.17, which he had finished just a few weeks earlier. For like their relatives the mynahs, starlings are also well-known mimics, not just of piano music but of other birds, lawn mowers, car alarms, phones and human speech. Mark Avery, the naturalist, conservationist and writer based in nearby Raunds, has a blog on starling mimics with links to recordings of wild starlings doing impressions, and a quick internet search will reveal captive starlings mimicking human speech.

Although frequent visitors to the churchyard and gardens, starlings are not as common as they were. The flocks seen in and around the churchyard are too small to form the giant murmurations seen on TV nature programmes, although you can still see flocks of up to around a hundred birds over the village. Large murmurations are particularly seen in the winter when our resident starlings are joined by cousins migrating from cold Scandinavia.

Overall, though, starling populations have halved since the 1990s, and by over 80% since the 1970s. As always, there's probably a complicated mix of reasons for their now appearing on the UK Red List. The use of insecticides and loss of worm and insect-rich grassland are probably major causes. Other intriguing reasons might include pollution with human drugs, which we excrete in our wee and poo. Starlings in winter get an increasing proportion of their food from invertebrates living in farm slurry and at sewage works. Studies at York University showed that worms at sewage works are contaminated with, among other things, the antidepressant Prozac, and, even at low doses, this affected starling behaviour. Starlings on Prozac had reduced fear of predators, reduced appetite, and were so

chilled out they lost all interest in sex – not great if your population is already in decline.

It's not just human drugs getting into the environment that can cause problems for wildlife. The spot-on flea treatments, readily bought from supermarkets and the like for dogs and cats, quickly wash off into drains and waterways. The chemicals in them, particularly fipronil and imidacloprid, were originally designed as insecticides for crops, but have long been banned from agricultural use across Europe owing to their devastating effects on, particularly, aquatic invertebrates. The effects travel up the food chain, reducing the food for birds and other wildlife. Imidacloprid is a neonicotinoid – the group of insecticides infamous for their effects on bees. That despite being banned for crops, they can still be detected in our rivers and streams – especially in urban waterways – is probably down to their use in pets. The immediate answer for us pet owners is simple; avoid spot-on flea treatments, and only use flea treatments to treat, not year-round to 'prevent'.

Read more about our churchyard wildlife on our web pages – St James, Gretton