

Notes on the Starling

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In order that I might get some idea as to movements of Starlings and what attracted them here and there, whether it was fruit, grain, wet or dry seasons, or insects, I suggested to the Agricultural Department of New South Wales that a card (questionnaire) be drawn up, and sent to all agricultural and fruit inspectors. The Department went further, and arranged for all the States to fall into line, so that all now issue the same card, and each inspector through out the Commonwealth makes a return once a month over a period of twelve months. So far, though many hundreds of cards have come to hand, I have been unable to solve the problem; in fact, it is worse now that I am not able to "make a guess." Very briefly, I would make the following observations from a perusal of the cards returned:—

Tasmania.—It would appear that there are more Starlings in Tasmania regularly than in any other State. The reports are on a par with those from New South Wales; both fruit and insects are eaten, but it seems that insects form the major portion of the diet. This is not to suggest that fruit is not damaged, for the north-east and middle north suffer most in this respect. Clover seed is eaten, and freshly-germinated grain pulled up. Starlings have also been observed picking ticks from the backs of sheep.

Victoria.—The flocks in Victoria do not seem to vary much in the different districts throughout the eight months for which I have returns. They attack most of the soft fruits, and do damage in many parts, but in eating fallen fruit evidently destroy many destructive fruit pests. All of the country centres report that good work is being done by the Starling in destroying grasshoppers and caterpillars, while some of the sheep men describe them as desirable birds, being entirely insectivorous in their districts. As in Tasmania, the Starling has been noticed picking the ticks from the backs of sheep.

New South Wales.—According to the returns on the cards, the Starlings moved about in a most exasperating manner from no apparent cause—in hundreds one day, thousands the following week, few the next, then all back again. Maybe the absentees were attacking fruit or grasshoppers somewhere else, but I cannot trace their movements from the cards submitted, though very full and complete information is supplied in most cases. Young district, a fruit centre, is definitely against the Starling, while the Murrumbidgee irrigation areas give varying accounts.

South Australia.—This year at least, Starlings have not

been observed in South Australia in such numbers as previously. From January to September, the weather was mostly dry, with only here and there some rain, only one or two months being described as wet. The Starlings were evidently influenced by the weather conditions, and where they occurred in numbers, fruit in season was attacked; figs and grapes suffered most, but with the exception of Roseworthy district, where flocks of thousands were seen, the damage was not great. Despite the dry season experienced, when it would be natural for Starlings to eat fruit so as to get sufficient moisture, many districts reported that caterpillars, grubs and grasshoppers formed a great portion of their diet.

Queensland.—Cards to hand so far show that there are no Starlings in the following centres:—Bowen, Bernleigh, Charleville, Cloncurry, Cooran, Eumundi, Longreach, Maroochy, Mareeba, Rockhampton, Sandford, and Woodford. At Cardwell, a small flock was seen in February. Brisbane reports no damage. At Roma, there are a few Starlings, eating grapes. They only appear when the grapes are ripening. Stanthorpe—Very few birds January and February; fruit not attacked. Townsville—A few pairs seen during January, but none later; no damage done. Warwick—A few pairs seen in January at Goondiwindi and a small flock in February. Regarded as insectivorous, the Sparrows being reported worse than Starlings. The Starling evidently never will invade Queensland to the same extent that it has other States, as it appears to like the temperate and cold climates.

My suggestion is that we must keep our eyes open, and cast aside our prejudices. This is an economic question, not an æsthetic one, and is a matter for ornithologists rather than bird-lovers. The latter is too apt to cast aside all introduced birds as bad, but biological problems must be met biologically to be solved. We all know that the Starling is a dirty nester, that it takes possession of the nesting sites of many of our native birds, and that it eats fruit, seed, grain and insects. Here our problem begins, because we have the Starling with us for all time.

Observations on the Currawong.—I have heard, at various times, the Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*) described as a rogue, a villain, and a thief. Until recently my personal observations did not include anything which could convict him of nefarious practices, although when birds' eggs and young nestlings mysteriously disappeared he was nearly always under suspicion. The following two observations (both occurring in National Park, Sydney) shed some light upon his character.