

The cleverness of starlings

Have you ever seen it? So many birds up in the air all at once, that it seems just like a cloud? Starling murmurations. Suddenly you feel a rush of wings. There are so many of them, that you cannot tell them apart. Fanning out as they do they form patterns; in flocks they swoop right past one another. Suddenly it seems like the cloud of birds tumbles over in a darkening black against the brightening sky. And then you see the flock fan out again in round lemniscates, loops, or sudden bends. Above the land or above the water. As if they all know exactly where they should go. Because you never see the birds collide. There are never too many of them. There is always room for one more. Occasionally a covetous bird of prey will fly through, his beak gaping wide, determined to grab one of them. But he won't succeed, he cannot choose, does not know where they're going. Usually he'll just slink off. Disoriented, at a loss, as if his head is reeling.

There you see the strength of the group, the joy of the group, the security of the group. This is how they always play, fly and gather together before or after a long journey.

Sometimes you'll see the same amount of birds sitting on power poles and cables; a whole row of starlings will be sitting there, just murmuring a bit. Almost as if they're singing each other to sleep. Or they'll all be chirping and chattering up in a tree; in the city, at the edge of a forest, near a station. They gather in the autumn or the spring, usually in the morning or evening. Apparently that is when starlings travel.

But did you know that these same birds live mostly in pairs for a large part of the year? They will build a nest, in a hollow. Diligently they drag over all kinds of things to make it a good nest. The female will brood there, while the males look for food. In those times you only rarely see starlings in little groups 'going out to shop'. Then they will stroll through the grass with their family and pick insects out of the ground. If they spot a stranger, they immediately chase them off. 'Don't come near me or my brooding wife! My family comes first, travelling is for later.'

Starlings know when it is best to be with a great many. And starlings know when it is best to be with only two. That is the cleverness of starlings.

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