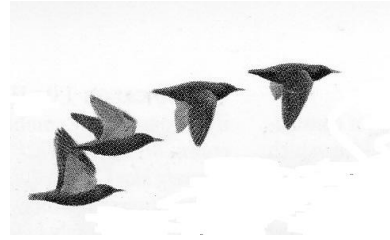


Murmuration

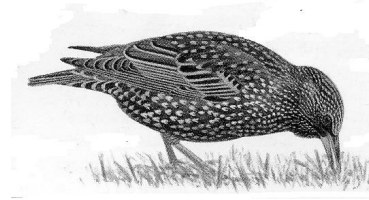
“A Murmuration of Starlings”. Somehow a single Starling seems a very strange idea. For the most impressive thing about Starlings is the way that they congregate in huge flocks in the winter. During the day they feed in grassy fields in smaller gatherings. but as the day wears on they gather into huge swirling masses, which darken the sky like plumes of smoke. And then they gradually disappear into their chosen roost site, which could be a city centre, a wood, a belt of trees or a reedbed. Many people regard a Starling roost as one of the most impressive wildlife sights in Britain.



It is likely that many of our local starlings are currently roosting in the reedbed downstream from Blackpool Mill which can be seen from the viewpoint in Minwear Woods (walk down from the picnic site at SN054139). It is well worth a visit on a fine evening – the first flocks arrive about an hour before dusk - and it provides us with a chance to see this spectacle at first hand. Last year it was estimated that several hundred thousand birds used this roost, until eventually all the reeds were flattened and they moved off to a new site.

There is also a much bigger roost in the spruce plantation at Dudwell Mountain. You can park right next to it at SM906221 and watch the Starlings whoosh over your head from the south or alternatively watch from a distance by driving up the track off the B4330 to a viewpoint at SM918234. On a good night the Starlings will whirl around in spectacular shapes, their actions often triggered by the various birds of prey which are looking for an easy meal. A mild night without too much wind usually give the best sightings - if it is too windy or too cold the Starlings just tend to fly straight into the roost.

As I write this at the beginning of November the Starlings are just arriving - they are late this year, probably due to mild autumn weather and plenty of food in their breeding areas, but possibly also due to the prolonged westerly winds which could have held up their journey from the north and east. For Starlings are a winter pleasure for us – there are very few breeding birds in this area, though it is not really obvious why this should be. Although still very numerous in winter, they are decreasing rapidly as a breeding bird in the UK, and as far as I know the cause is just not known. Other birds which feed on grasslands, such as Rooks, are doing well. Other birds which nest in similar sized holes, such as Greater Spotted Woodpecker, are doing well. So why not Starlings?



Rosemary Royle

