

# SOUTH SHORE SKIMMER



### NEXT MEETING

*Enid Klein*

**DATE:** Tuesday, November 13, 2007  
**TIME:** 7:30 P.M.  
**PLACE:** Freeport Memorial Library  
144 W. Merrick Rd. (at S. Ocean Ave.)  
**SPEAKER:** Mary Eschwei  
**TOPIC:** Antarctica

Miles of penguins! Dancing albatrosses! Come on a trip to Antarctica and also visit the South Orkney Islands, South Shetland Islands, South Georgia, and the Falkland Islands. Our good ship Endeavour takes us by spectacular icebergs, in close to receding ice shelves, and even to one island that looks more like a desert. Motorized rubber boats (Zodiacs) drop us off onshore to explore each day. Different islands have different penguin species — we walk among five different species, hear them braying like donkeys, and smell them like dead fish! We get to be up close and personal to Wandering Albatrosses, also to the Black-browed Albatrosses as they “excavate” their strange columnar nests. Lots more to see — even stunted mosses and flowers — and a few shorebirds! Come enjoy the trip of a lifetime to Antarctica!

**Pre-Meeting Program on Birds.** Starting at 7 P.M. each month, Scott Oglesby expands our birding horizons in the room beyond our coffee-break tables. Topic suggestions for future talks are welcome.

**Parking Lots.** In addition to the parking lot adjacent to the library, there’s a lightly used, well-lit, and fairly close municipal lot on the east side of S. Ocean Ave., on the near (south) side of the Gulf station that borders Sunrise Highway.

◆◆◆◆◆ IN ORDER TO MINIMIZE WASTE, PLEASE  
◆◆◆◆◆ BRING COFFEE MUGS TO OUR MEETINGS.  
◆◆◆◆◆ SHADE-GROWN COFFEE PROTECTS RAINFORESTS! ◆◆◆◆◆

◆◆◆◆◆ OUR E-LIST [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ssas\\_list](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ssas_list) ◆◆◆◆◆

### VOTE FOR SEA FUND III

SSAS’s board urges our members living in the Town of Oyster Bay to vote yes on Election Day for the \$60 million Save Environmental Assets Fund bond issue. The Fund would provide \$30 million for open space and parkland acquisition, and \$30 million for parks improvements.

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### GET 'EM WHILE THEY LAST!

*Therese Lucas*

Only nine left! SSAS is selling National Audubon Society 2008 wall calendars at the reduced, tax-free price of \$10 each. We still have six “Audubon Songbirds & Other Backyard Birds,” two “Arctic: The Last Great Wilderness,” and one “Birding Trails” (each month’s spread includes a map and detailed text about the featured species and ecosystem). Calendars are available at general meetings and some bird walks.

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### PARKING AT CITIBANK - OR NOT

*Michael Spelling*

For those of you who have been using Citibank’s parking lot for our general meetings and haven’t already heard the tale, the arrangement we had with them has been broken due to the departure of the employee who had offered it to us and the refusal of a new manager to support it. However, their towing company has my faxed list of our meeting nights through May and the bank manager told me that she wouldn’t instruct the towing company to ignore it, so it’s probably still safe to park there for now. If you’re towed, however, you’re on your own...

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Wendy Murbach

One of the wonderful perks that you get from an Audubon membership is the chance to be a part of your local Audubon chapter, South Shore Audubon Society.

You are automatically a valued member of this active and friendly chapter, so please come out to the next meeting at the Freeport Library from 7:30-9:30 P.M. on the second Tuesday of the month (second Monday this February) to hear what you can do to help preserve your local environment's health and viability, to hear about local issues that you can help to solve, and to see an interesting program.

Whether you are a beginning birder or someone with a large life list, you will enjoy our weekly Sunday bird walks led by Elliott Kutner. Check out the special events that are mentioned in this *Skimmer*. Attend them yourself, and bring your family and friends too.

You are warmly invited to be an active participant in this vibrant all-volunteer organization comprised of persons who, like you, care about the earth we live on, about our local environment, and about the creatures that live alongside us.

Our new members since the last *Skimmer* are:

Atlantic Beach .....	Maxwell Stein
Baldwin .....	Benedict Crescimanno, Linda A. Holly, Diane Lorinz, Michel Seide
Bellmore .....	Miriam O. Connell, Charles J. Lillin
East Rockaway .....	Gloria Weisman
Farmingdale .....	Cynthia Lenz, Diane Losurdo
Franklin Square .....	Jean Cerunda
Garden City .....	Dorinda W. Bloss
Hicksville .....	Mario & Teresa Campo, Richard Evers, Mr. & Mrs. James Peters
Island Park .....	Joseph Garone
Levittown .....	Deena Moore, ? Townsend, Steindor Tuerlings
Long Beach .....	Silvia Reiter
Massapequa .....	Marybeth Billerman
Massapequa Park .....	Roger Schmid
Merrick .....	A. Markovich
Oceanside .....	John A. Hay, Richmond Kotcher
Plainview .....	David Kubrick
Rockville Centre .....	Michael J. Ferguson, Judith E. Rudman
Valley Stream .....	Susan Saul
West Hempstead .....	Ken Benzing
Woodmere .....	Gary Kaplan



### SSAS Mission Statement

*The mission of South Shore Audubon Society is to promote environmental education; conduct research pertaining to local bird populations, wildlife, and habitat; and preserve and restore our environment, through responsible activism, for the benefit of both people and wildlife.*

## BIRD WALKS

Elliott Kutner

All walks start at 9:30 A.M.; no walk if it rains or snows or temperature is below 25°F. Any questions? Call Elliott at 486-7667. Directions and summaries may be found at [ssaudubon.org](http://ssaudubon.org).

Oct. 28	Massapequa Preserve (LIRR N.E. lot)
Nov. 4	Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge
Nov. 11	Point Lookout Town Park, S.E. corner
Nov. 18	Massapequa Preserve (LIRR N.E. lot)
Nov. 25	Hempstead Lake State Park (Southern State Parkway Exit 18 south, Field #1)
Dec. 2	Massapequa Preserve (LIRR N.E. lot)
Dec. 9	Zach's Bay Parking Field #4, N.E. corner
Dec. 16	Jones Beach West End #2, N.E. corner
Dec. 23 & 30	<i>Holiday Break — No Walks</i>
Jan. 6	Jones Beach West End #2, N.E. corner
Jan. 13	Massapequa Preserve (LIRR N.E. lot)
Jan. 20	Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge
Jan. 27	Zach's Bay Parking Field #4, N.E. corner

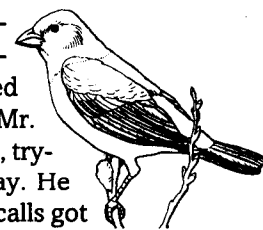
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### IS THAT ANOTHER BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD?

Jonathan Staller

It was late April of 2007. I was at the public library in Great Neck and came upon an unusual sight. I saw a male Brown-headed Cowbird land on the passenger-side door of a car. As it hopped along towards the hood, it ran into an obstacle — the side view mirror!

This is when the fun began. The bird was looking into the mirror and saw his own reflection. He started to call loudly and flashed his wings, trying to scare off his new acquaintance. His rival, in return, displayed his wings but wasn't calling back. Mr. Cowbird started to get desperate, trying to scare his own image away. He started to peck at the mirror, his calls got louder and louder, and he stretched out his wings as far as he possibly could.



This proceeded for another six minutes. Finally he got bored or realized he was looking at himself, and took off and flew to a nearby tree. The funny thing is that he left his business card on the door next to the side-view mirror!

*P.S.* A special shout out to all my friends. I have been gone quite a while but I haven't forgotten any of you. In fact, I miss you all so very dearly. Some of you know that I've added a new member to my family. I am still a member of SSAS. Not active; yet still a member. I love bird-watching thanks to Mr. Elliott Kutner. Hopefully soon you will see me again on a bird walk or at the monthly meeting with my wife Sarah and my lovely daughter Jaqueline. Thanks South Shore.

*Editor's note:* Jonathan was our president in 1999–2000.



## STARLINGS

Janet Lembke

*Editor's note:* This article originally appeared in the March/April 1998 issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*.

Starlings are opportunists, and opportunists are survivors.

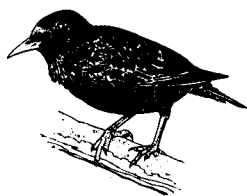
April: An eviction takes place in the tall pine snag near our house. For two years, the snag has served as a high-rise condo for woodpeckers. For each of the last two springs, a pair of pileated woodpeckers has excavated a new hole and nested deep within the dead wood. Early this April, a pair of northern flickers moved into the pileated's old residence, and red-bellied woodpeckers drilled out a new apartment in the topmost level of the snag, at a juncture marked by the broken, silvery stubs of three branches. There the red-bellied male would drum and trill.

It may have been his presence that attracted the attentions of the small, dark stranger. Perhaps the stranger's eye was simply drawn to a handy-looking hole. Whatever the reason, eviction ensued. The stranger was a starling, of course, and within the hour, he began furnishing the cavity with pine straw. His diligence soon lured a mate, who helped him with the finishing touches, then settled in to lay her four or five greenish-white eggs. As his kind does (and other kinds as well), he guarded her jealously and at the same time copulated with other females every chance he could get. He may even have found a second mate and established another household.

Later, the secretive flickers leave no trace of nesting failure or success, but the pileateds fledged at least three young. The red-bellies stayed in the vicinity, and the appearance of young birds testifies to their triumph over dispossession. As for the starlings, the soot-brown bodies of fledglings mingle with black adult bodies to crowd the three silvery branch-stubs at the top of the snag. And there they perch, announcing themselves with wheezes and sighs.

*Sturnus vulgaris*, the European starling (pictured) — this is the bird that North Americans love to despise. It regularly dispossesses birds that people consider more attractive — not just woodpeckers but other cavity-nesters, like bluebirds, prothonotary warblers, and great crested flycatchers. It even competes for space with wood ducks. Nor are its raids on the territories of other species restricted to the natural world; it drives city officials to desperation by soiling buildings as thoroughly as pigeons do, and enrages farmers and orchardists by destroying crops. It is the only bird that ever provoked my gentle father into picking up his gun.

Starlings are not protected anywhere in the United States, however. As one of an unholy trinity that includes the house sparrow and the rock dove (pigeon), the bird is considered open game. State laws apply to all three,



nonetheless, with a hunting license required for varmint-plinkers, or a special permit for scientists who aim to trap, collect, or study them.

Nevertheless, though the bird does not muster much human support, it has proved useful to us in several small, peculiar ways. It is ornamental: in Europe, people deliberately attract starlings by erecting nest boxes. It helps anglers: in Britain, the feathers, taken from birds shot in their winter roosts, are used for fishing flies. It is edible: the bodies of the plucked birds are sent to the Continent and turned into paté. And *S. vulgaris* has been downright inspirational: not only did it provoke Mozart into two compositions, but it has also served as a muse to John Updike, from whom it called forth a fine poem, "The Great Scarf of Birds." Recently, a printmaking project featuring starlings was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

But where do starlings fit in the greater world, the world that encompasses both them and us?

All the starlings on earth — and they are legion — got off to an innocuous start. The family, with 24 genera and more than 100 species, is the Sturnidae, which means simply "starlingkind." The name comes from *sturnus*, the word that Romans used to designate the starling most familiar to the Western world, the bird that science has denominated *vulgaris*, or "common." The family includes a share of drab, compact, slim-billed birds that bear a close resemblance to the European starling, and it also takes in the mynahs and many brightly colored species. Golden-breasted, violet-backed, red-winged, red-browed, and rose-colored — the vernacular names attest to their splendor.

Some starling wear crests, others grow wattles, and the several Asian species, in particular, feature patches of bare skin around the eyes. Although most nest in holes, some are choosy, preferring holes located in cliffs or behind waterfalls, while others like to dig out their own cavities in muddy banks or drill them in dead trees. A few actually build cup-shaped or domed nests. Although many species lay spotted eggs, those laid by members of the genus *Sturnus* are generally spotless and pale. And, except for the Antarctic, starlingkind has made itself at home all over the world.

Our bird, the European starling, is found not only throughout Western Europe and the United States, including Alaska's Arctic north, but also in places as far flung as Iran and Siberia, Egypt and the Madeira Islands, not to mention all the regions in between. It has been introduced into South Africa and Australia. It was the very first species I saw as my plane came in for a landing in New Zealand (the second and third were also introduced birds — the house sparrow and the mallard).

European starling — another geographic term might have been more accurate to designate a bird, and a family, that probably originated in southeast Asia, where it was likely an arboreal species that sipped nectar, ate fruit and pollen, and snacked on insects. Some of the Asian species

still lead elevated lives, but members of the genus *Sturnus* have descended to the ground. Though they have not forsaken their passion for fruit, their dinners more often consist of grubs and other insect delicacies harbored in the soil. Clever birds, they long ago spotted and learned to exploit an underused subterranean larder.

Part of the European starling's success in colonizing the United States has to do with this ability to find buried treasure. It prefers to forage in open places with short vegetation, such as pastures and lawns. The technique is this: insert closed bill into ground, open mandibles, probe for and find grub, shut bill on prey, and withdraw it forthwith. Meanwhile, between captures, a feeding bird will strut on the grass, engage in leapfrog with comrades, lift off and up for a couple of feet, wheel, and come down for a quick landing before reinserting bill in ground.

But the starling could not have colonized the country had it arrived here with the earliest settlers, nor could it have gained so much as a claw hold for the next two or three centuries. Only when we cleared the land did we make starling-friendly habitat. Even then, the species could not have settled in without some help. Although the European starling has always been a migratory bird, breeding in Britain and Norway, for example, and wintering in Spain, its seasonal movements cover limited territory. So, if it hadn't been for a human magic carpet, the Atlantic Ocean would have presented a daunting natural barrier to westward expansion.

At this point William Shakespeare figures in the tale. He is not, however, among those who have found the starling inspirational. Instead, in *Henry IV, Part I*, one of his characters proposes to use the bird as an instrument of mockery. The king believes that Edward Mortimer, the Earl of March, is a traitor, but the younger Henry Percy, known as Hotspur, protests. The king, unpersuaded, enjoins Hotspur not to speak of Mortimer again. Hotspur, however, vows not only to speak of Mortimer but to find ingenious help in doing so:

*I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak  
Nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it him,  
To keep his anger still in motion.*

Here, Shakespeare notes the starling's stellar gift for mimicry, which was also the subject of much earlier comment. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century A.D., mentions a starling and several nightingales that belonged to Nero as a boy. The birds, given into the care of a trainer, were taught to utter words, then sentences of increasing length, in both Latin and Greek. (For ordinary, untutored starling-talk, the Romans used an onomatopoeic verb — *pisito*, I wheeze, I sigh, I hiss.) Pliny's record is one of the earliest to note the European starling's abilities as a vocal acrobat, but he was hardly the first to mention the bird. In the Western canon, Homer's *Iliad* may well have that honor, twice bringing an image of starlings — *psares*, in Greek — into the fray of battle.

Mimicry: the starling is hardly confined to Greek and Latin sentences or to reiterating "Mortimer." The bird finds a stimulus in music, too. So Mozart (pictured) discovered to his amazement and delight.

The place, Vienna; the year, 1784: soon after the composer had completed his "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G Major" (K. 453), he heard the last movement's happy little tune played back to him out of the blue. Or rather, out of the bill of a caged starling, which he bought immediately. Here, composer inspired starling. Not much later, in 1787, the roles were reversed: starling inspired composer, and Mozart's music imitates the bird. The notes of his "Sextet for Strings and Two Horns" (K. 522) are embellished with murmurs, wheezes, whistles, and sighs, and the very last note is a loud, ungainly squawk. The piece has been nicknamed *ein musikalischer Spass* — "a musical joke."



In 1880, less than a century later, Cassell's *Natural History* made a statement that all too soon came to seem like a joke: "The Starlings are found only in the Old World, where they form a very large and natural Group."

Reenter Shakespeare, the man who might be blamed for giving European starlings their magic carpet. In 1890 and 1891, only a decade after Cassell assigned the species to the Old World, 80 to 100 birds were brought across the Atlantic and released in New York City's Central Park. The importer was Eugene Scheffelin, the leading light of an acclimatization society. Such societies, with the aim of bringing plants and animals from one part of the world to another, were founded by the dozens in the 19th century. In the case of starlings, this aim was realized with measureless success.

Scheffelin's starlings were not the first to have been brought to the New World; earlier efforts had failed, nor do we know why they were attempted. The reason behind Scheffelin's introduction is clear, however: Shakespeare. Scheffelin planned to bring here every bird that Shakespeare mentioned — thrushes, larks, "maggot-pies and choughs," the many others. The only one that took hold is the starling. Nor did it just take hold — it took over.

The timeline reads this way: 1890, release in Central Park; 1920, a claim staked in the Mid-Atlantic states, from Chesapeake Bay down through the Carolinas along the eastern side of the Appalachians; 1930, except for Maine, occupation of the United States to — and sometimes across — the Mississippi; 1940, Maine captured, along with much of New Brunswick; the western line now marked by the Rockies, with incursions into Mexico and Manitoba; 1950, a push to California's coast range, and another push into British Columbia; 1960, a new advance, from the southern tip of Canada's Georgian Bay west to the Pacific, thence south to Baja California. Right after that, starlings seized land in the Northwest Territories and Alaska, some of it above the Arctic Circle. By 1993, the number of





**South Shore Audubon Society**  
**P.O. Box 31**  
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A CHAPTER OF THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

*Americans Committed to Conservation*



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**Think Globally, but Join Locally!**

*Option 1.* You can join SSAS for a year by sending \$15 payable to **South Shore Audubon Society** using the form below. Our address is P.O. Box 31, Freeport, NY 11520-0031.

*Option 2.* To join NAS and your all-volunteer local chapter, you can help SSAS survive NAS's major dues-share cutbacks by joining Audubon through us for the same price that it costs if you join through NAS (we get \$0 unless you join through us). Mail the form below and your check payable to **National Audubon Society** to SSAS at the address above. The special rate for the first year is \$20 per household; \$15 for students and seniors.

 **Renewing?** Please send NAS renewals directly to NAS (we now get \$0 for all NAS renewals).

**Donations to SSAS are always welcome!**



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