

Bird Beat #69

A Couple Invasive Bird Species

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(Photo credits: Jonathan Irons)

Over the past few years, the Lower Shore Land Trust has been working with local partners to get the Lower Eastern Shore Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management ([LES-PRISM](#)) off the ground. This effort focuses mainly on invasive vegetation which tends to be the most noticeable and destructive of invasive lifeforms though insects also get a fair amount of attention due to their potential to destroy entire crop fields and denude forests. Generally speaking, an invasive species is any life form that is not native to a given region that causes significant economic and/or ecologic harm. This means that everything from pythons in Florida to Scotch broom in Washington State to mitten crabs in San Francisco to spotted lantern fly in Pennsylvania are considered dangerous invasives.

One aspect typical of invasives is they tend to be unable to relocate themselves to another area... or, stated in another way, humans have to lend a hand in their movement. After all, a species that is biologically highly mobile will naturally colonize areas as it moves therefore it wouldn't typically be considered invasive. Take mushrooms, for instance. They reproduce via spores which are able to cover vast distances in air currents and could conceivably travel to and colonize any part of the globe where conditions are favorable for a given species.

Birds would similarly constitute a group of animals that, due to their ability to fly, are unlikely candidates for invasive status. Long-distance vagrancy is common in birds, and it is well agreed that some species, such as the cattle egret, have naturally colonized areas separated by great distances like oceans. The cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) is a species native to Africa and far western Europe and was first noted in



South America in the 1930's. Scientists subsequently followed its colonization of North America over the next few decades. Even if its natural self-relocation didn't disqualify the cattle egret from invasive species designation, its benign nature would. There are, however, multiple species of birds that do qualify. The two most common in the U.S. are known to most Americans, birders and non-birders alike: the European starling and the European house sparrow.

The house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), subject of a [previous Bird Beat](#), was introduced into the U.S. in 1851 as a biological control for an outbreak of linden moth caterpillars in Brooklyn. Within 50 years, house sparrows could be found in every continental U.S. state and was known to compete with native species for food and nesting sites leading to population declines in species such as purple martins, tree swallows, and bluebirds (all subjects of [previous Bird Beats](#)). It is estimated that there are now over 540 million house sparrows in the United States making it one of our country's most numerous birds.





Legend has it that the European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), a black bird with iridescent feathers and white polka dots, was introduced by a Shakespeare fanatic named Eugene Schieffelin in 1890 due to the reference to the bird in Henry IV Part I. It is well-known that he released 100 starlings in New York, but it is not agreed on whether he was the first one to release the bird in the Western Hemisphere or if it was actually due to his Shakespearean obsession. Again, within about 50 years, starlings had spread throughout the Lower 48 and were considered destructive agricultural pests. Today it is estimated that there are over 220 million starlings in the U.S. causing over \$800 million in crop damages annually.

Though starlings and house sparrows may have eventually made their ways to the U.S. anyway (species relocation has grown steadily with the growth of the global supply chain), it is important to note that the deliberate introduction of species without thought of consequence is unwise and could lead to serious problems. Both of these species are, like phragmites, so entrenched in the country as to be naturalized, and control efforts are largely useless now. Unfortunately, they still cause significant issues for native wildlife and agriculture, and those of us who have purple martin houses and bluebird boxes have to spend a considerable amount of time and effort to keep the nesting areas clear of these two exotic interlopers.