

ORION

MAGAZINE

SACRED & MUNDANE

Mocking Bard

BY RACHEL MCCRYSTAL

Published in the [July/August 2007](#) issue of *Orion* magazine

In the late nineteenth century, the American Acclimation Society, formed of recent European immigrants, attempted to populate North America with all of the species of birds mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare. Many of the introduced birds quickly died or failed to reproduce. However, there was one notable success: in 1890 and 1891, Eugene Schieffelin, a wealthy German theater aficionado, released between 80 and 150 European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) into Central Park. The North American landscape of farmlands and fields agreed with the scrappy black birds, and by 1910, starlings had settled around Philadelphia; by 1924, they reached Detroit; and in the 1940s, there were starling sightings along the Pacific Coast.

The current North American population of 200 million starlings is widely acknowledged as a scourge to native birds, notably the eastern bluebird and the Gila woodpecker, which compete with the starling for nesting space. Starlings also travel in flocks that destroy whole fields of lucrative agricultural crops, such as grapes and wheat. They are clever mimics—echoing natural noises, machines, and human speech—and are happy in developed areas like suburbs and city parks, where they add to the ruckus with their loud chatter. Indeed, the bird has proved more aggressive and adaptable than a Shakespearean antihero.

The starling's Shakespearean cameo appears in *Henry IV*, with a reference to the bird's ability to mimic human speech: "I'll have a starling that shall be taught to speak nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it to him to keep his anger still in motion." Environmental artist Brian Collier has set out to manipulate this avian aptitude for speech, teaching wild starlings to pronounce and sing the name not of Mortimer but of their conveyer—Schieffelin. In this way, the birds will vocally identify themselves as an introduced species.

Teaching starlings to say "Schieffelin" is admittedly an arduous process. Collier and his wife, who live in Bloomington, Illinois, raised one starling by hand and have erected multiple nests on their property with movement-triggered audio devices that murmur "Schieffelin" over and over to the nesting starling families. Collier recruits friends,

relatives, and visitors to his art shows and exhibits to call out the name to any starling that they see in their own neighborhoods.

“The public is a major participant in this project,” said Collier, who admits that he has yet to hear a starling respond to his fervent coaching. “Basically this project is about teaching humans, not starlings. I have the admittedly utopian goal of changing the way people see the natural world. This altered perspective will hopefully eventually lead to changing how people interact with the natural world. Well, if artists can’t be dreamers, who can?”



The Orion Society, 187 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230
413-528-4422 / Toll Free 888-909-6568 / Toll Free Subscriptions 800-254-3713

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