

# WINGS OF CHANGE

## Training Birds for Continent-wide Sound Installation

by Jessica S. Owings

It is a blustery and dreary Saturday afternoon in April as I navigate the one-way streets and construction zones of downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Neither ideal weather for wildlife watching nor a typical bird-watching location, my destination is Urban Culture Project's Paragraph gallery on 12th Street. From here, BD Collier's *Teach the Starlings* educational tour will depart.

Starlings are the ubiquitous non-native species of birds introduced to the United States in the late 19th century by Eugene Schieffelin. Under the auspice of the American Acclimatization Society, Schieffelin released little more than a hundred European starlings in New York City's Central Park. The mission of the American Acclimatization Society, founded by Schieffelin, was to introduce all of the birds mentioned in Shakespearean plays. The intention was to supplement the American wilderness with a supposed superior array of European wildlife. Many of these released species did not adapt or survive, but the starling managed to thrive. A little more than a century later, the starling is considered an invasive species of North America, as their population exceeds 200 million across the continent.

Edward O. Wilson's *The Future of Life* introduced Brian Collier to this compelling bit of history, fueling his fascination with wildlife in urban settings. Initially his interest in the bird manifested itself in the form of a project entitled "I'll have a starling," referencing a passage in Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*. This initial endeavor included photos, audio, books, and sculptures. As a more expansive project, *Teach the Starlings* is an ongoing collaboration between Collier and willing participants across the country, a grassroots effort to "teach the starlings" to say "Schieffelin." BD Collier — the Primary Vector of Schieffelin Saying Starlings — is the monkier

Collier developed for *Teach the Starlings*. As his semblance BD Collier, the artist recently founded his own environmental organization, the Society for a Re-Natural Environment. The society encapsulates *Teach the Starlings* and several other concurrent environmentally based projects.

Collier explains the project to a group of eight gathered in the gallery that starlings have the uncanny ability to mimic a variety of sounds. Pliny the Elder, in ancient Rome, claimed to have been acquainted with a starling that recited Latin phrases. Mozart kept a pet starling that many claim inspired the quirky composition, *K. 522 (A Musical Joke)*. On a laptop computer, Collier plays some sound bites of starlings chattering, then plays a couple of videos that depict pet starlings chirping the sounds of ringing bells, mechanical noises jumbled with phrases like "give me a kiss," "what are you doing," "good morning," and "good boy."

The effort is deceptively simplistic. The objective is to locate starlings, then project the name Schieffelin in their direction. Ideally, the birds will mimic the phrase and spread the sound of Schieffelin to the entire starling population. Collier recently relocated to downtown Kansas City upon garnering a





Installation views of *Teach the Starlings in Kansas City* (left to right): Map of North America painted on gallery wall showing the spread of starlings since their introduction and the site of other starling leaching projects; detail of local Kansas City-area map with black and white pins marking starling sightings and nest sites; BD Collier motion-activated nest box that says "Schieffelin." Photos: Tracy Abeln

faculty position with the Kansas City Art Institute. He prefers to "work where he lives" and considers *Teach the Starlings* the beginnings of his relationship with the city. The Paragraph gallery, located downtown, served appropriately as a base for this operation. A large map in Paragraph documented the historical spread of the starling across North America, pinpointing locations of other *Teach the Starlings* events. An inset of downtown Kansas City was marked with black-and-white straight-pins, the former denoting sightings, the latter roosts and nests. Projected video footage of flocks of starlings, also known as murmurations, in the Kansas City area occupied the south, dimly lit wall of the space. In a nearby corner, an informative DVD explained starling history, behavior, and how to participate in the project.

Participation is not limited to the assertive activity intended for one particular afternoon. Collier has designed motion-sensitive birdhouses and suet birdfeeders to add to the birds' training. Triggered by the presence of activity, "Schieffelin" is announced through a speaker integrated into the house and feeder design. The idea, explains Collier, is that the birds will associate the sound "Schieffelin" with their food. The process of teaching is enabled with a little positive reinforcement.

#### URBAN BIRD CALLING

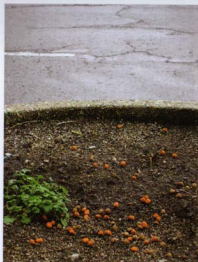
"The more recruits, the better," says Collier, as he distributes identifying buttons to each of us. We are encouraged to grab a handful of informative postcards

from a small pedestal to inform others of the project and to welcome their participation. Adjacent to the postcards is a sign-up sheet that serves as a kind of contract, asking the participant to what extent he or she will commit to the project. I sign up. Thinking of my two cats, I am not certain I am capable of harboring a pet starling to teach then release, but I contemplate, nonetheless.

Armed with an acquainted ear for starling chatter and a small plastic cone to amplify our voices, we embark on our tour. Locating starlings involves three critical concepts. First, listen. Second, locate nesting or roosting sites. Third, accurately identify the birds. For the latter two steps, and in the spirit of an educational tour, Collier is an encyclopedia of helpful hints. He



Teach the Starlings walking tour (left to right). Collier calls to a few starlings out in the trees along Grand Boulevard near 13th Street; pellets of orange bird food are coloring sidewalk planters along Grand Boulevard to attract starlings from their roosts; a parking building on the 1300-block of Wyandotte seen from the south has anti-bird screening that keeps out pigeons but provides an urban habitat for starlings. Photos: Tracy Abeln



explains the starling breeding cycle; and this particular time of the year is their mating season, therefore, their plumage has already changed from the white-tipped winter feathers to a glossy black and their beaks have shifted from a dark brown to a brighter yellow. They are cavity nesters, he explains, preferring to nest well over 10 feet off of the ground, in an enclosed space. Starlings are aggressive and frequently usurp nests of other cavity nesters such as bluebirds, sometimes killing the chicks, adding grasses, litter, and aromatic herbs plucked from gardens. Although they roost in large flocks, an instinctive behavior of predator-evasion, starlings nest only as a mated pair. Incidentally, Collier points out that predators do exist in the urban environment. Kestrels and red-tailed hawks hunt the downtown starlings and another non-native urban adaptor, the rock dove, or common pigeon.

Our path spirals out from the gallery, passing locations Collier has identified as starling roosts: the Midland

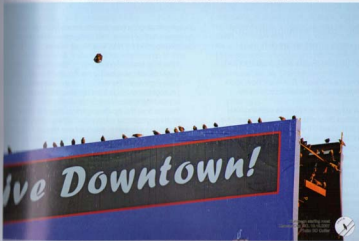
Theatre, the Main Street bus transfer station, and the NAIA (National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics) building. As we scan the buildings for evidence of starling activity, one identifiable characteristic is apparent — an abundance of bird mess on the buildings' façades and accompanying sidewalks. To attract the birds further, Collier scattered suet pellets along the ground in these particular areas the night previous, but much of the food remains. The weather's being particularly cold, windy, and generally unpleasant keeps our starling sightings to a minimum, but we manage two instances. The first involves a pair of starlings at 13th and Grand streets. Collier warned us that the birds are usually rather skittish and may be startled simply by a gaze in their direction. That first particular pair seems more intent on searching for food and less interested in mimicking our persistent calls of "Schieffelin!" As we round the corner, we see several more birds huddled in a scraggly tree. Unfortunately, they remain quiet, perhaps ruminating

the phrase to share with their population on a warmer, sunnier day. Several blocks later, another sighting is even less fruitful, the pair flitting off as we approach.

Despite their shyness, starlings prefer human activity. People notoriously leave food scraps and scatter other litter, both attractive sustenance for these scavengers. Humans also create construction sites, architectural details, abandoned buildings, and even streetlights to be appropriated as nesting cavities. Power lines and rooftops are ideal roosts for starlings more at home in fields than dense forests. The search for starlings changes the perception of an urban environment. Wildlife thrives amidst asphalt and sheer buildings; a closer inspection of the built landscape reveals life teeming in its nooks and crannies. Trees planted to beautify a street become homes. Signs identifying the building with the presence of a business or corporation are appropriated as ideal places to raise a brood. Collier points out the metal mesh designed



(1) Collier, Kansas City Adult European Starlings, Perching, 2008, archival digital print, 13" x 19". Courtesy of the artist



(2) Collier, Kansas City Adult European Starlings, Fixed, 2007, archival digital print, 13" x 19". Courtesy of the artist

to deter birds from claiming such spaces for their nests. Likewise, sharp, pointed material affixed to a roofline is an attempt to deter wildlife from that location. "It's fascinating to watch the constant battle between humans and [wildlife]," Collier says. "Although it's not native, it's nature that's certainly wild."

## FLYING FROM HERE

Humans carve urban landscapes out of formerly natural, wild landscapes. Humankind paves hillsides and dams rivers, creating man-made cityscapes in their place. Wildlife, however, hardly abandoned these settings. Starlings and other hardy and adaptable species fill an ecological niche in these structured environments, competing with, and unfortunately often displacing, native species. The presence of the European starling is both devastating and amazing. "As much mixed emotion that I have about the species, I have come to admire them," says Collier toward the end of the tour. "It's evidence of an incredibly intelligent, adaptable bird." Indeed, humans bulldoze their way in, but wildlife such as the European starling operates an ecological equivalent.

*Teach the Starlings* is a remarkable synthesis of science and art. As an analytical endeavor it informs an audience of an aspect of the urban environment, those swarms of noisy black birds, and the environmental impact of such a population. It brings us to the understanding that this is a rather direct outcome of flawed human intention. As a creative collaborative project, the absurdity of the objective is key. The birds will merely mimic the sound "Schieffelin," the man responsible for their North American presence, if such a goal is surmountable.

Teaching implies imparting knowledge, but the lesson is perhaps intended for the participating audience rather than the starling population. The project resembles a form of pacifist activism, teaching a population to affect change. Teaching a starling may trigger a spread of the mimicked sound. Teaching an idea of ecological consequence to one participant is potentially a sea change.\*

\*pronounced: SHE-llin

*Teach the Starlings in Kansas City* — A Project by BD Collier  
Paragraph Gallery  
Kansas City, Missouri  
816-221-5115  
March 21 - May 3, 2008

For more information regarding *Teach the Starlings*, visit  
[www.teachstarlings.societyyme.net](http://www.teachstarlings.societyyme.net)

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