

# NORTHERN RACCOON PREDATION ON EUROPEAN STARLING NESTLINGS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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#3 – 1255 Wain Road, Sidney, BC V8L 4R4

On 25 May 2009, while walking on a trail at 1255 Wain Road in North Saanich, British Columbia, I heard rustling on the ground and surprised a Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) which scurried off and climbed part way up a nearby tree, where it checked me out. As I watched it came down and walked toward another dead tree and climbed towards the top. Nearby in another tree was a rather agitated adult European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

The raccoon continued toward an old woodpecker cavity that was about one metre from the top of a 14 metre dead grand fir (*Abies grandis*; Figure 1). Once at the cavity it reached a forelimb into the cavity, brought out a large nestling European Starling and went around to a small perch on the other side of the snag and proceeded to eat the nestling. The raccoon made another trip back to the nest hole, brought out another nestling, which it ate on the same perch. It then cleaned its paws so I assumed that it was finished. It seems likely the raccoon was familiar with the nest, and may have visited it earlier, since brood sizes for starlings in British Columbia average between four and five nestlings (Campbell et al. 1997).

The nestlings were large, all-brown, and close to fledging. The nest cavity entrance hole was about seven centimetres in diameter and the snag diameter at breast height was 45 cm.

The food habits and diet of the Northern Raccoon have been well studied because of increasing conflicts with humans as the mammal expanded its range westward and northward in North America over the past five decades. The species is omnivorous and opportunistic, eating a wide variety of plants and animals that shift seasonally depending on availability (Zeveloff 2002, Feldhamer et al. 2003).

Birds are seasonally important to raccoons



**Figure 1.** Location of European Starling nest, in an old woodpecker hole, near the top of a grand fir snag, North Saanich, BC (Julie Stewart).

especially in areas where numbers are concentrated during the breeding season, such as waterfowl (Greenwood 1981) and seabirds (Hartman et al. 1997). Most predation of birds occurs on the eggs and nestlings of ground-nesting species. There are

few reports of raccoons predated bird nests above ground although nests of Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) and Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) have been exploited (Zevloff 2002).

Cabe (1993), in his treatise on the European Starling in North America, only reports predation of eggs by Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), and Ermine (*Mustela erminea*). In British Columbia, Hatler et al. (2008) do not mention songbirds as part of the diet for the Northern Raccoon.

It appears that my encounter may be the first instance reported of predation on the European Starling by the Northern Raccoon, certainly an opportunistic predator.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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#### **About the Author**

Barbara is a lifelong resident of the Greater Victoria, BC area, and is interested in all things natural. She has participated in many citizen science projects such as Christmas Bird Counts, Beached Bird Surveys, British Columbia Nest Record Scheme, Breeding Bird Surveys, Rare Bird Record Committees, British Columbia Bird Sighting Reports, and the new British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas.