Perquisitions

being the first volume of investigations, observations and musings collected on the

Thetford • London • Oxford

expedition led by

Professor William Starling of DodoLab

accompanied by

Leila Armstong, Lisa Hirmer, Andrew Hunter, Giles Lane, Josie Mills & Hazem Tagiuri

Perquisitions

The first volume in a series of three publications documenting the investigative excursions of Professor William Starling and his research team. This volume contains descriptions of the various participants' thoughts on the expedition and its rationale.



Professor Starling began his explorations in the Norfolk countryside, looking for signs of fellow starlings.



He searched the fields and the forest, but didn't see a single starling.



At the old Warreners' Lodge, Professor Starling saw no sign of rabbit nor starling.



The Professor waited, looking and listening, but there were no starlings.



In Thetford, near the river, the Professor thought he might have heard the song of an unseen starling.



He headed into town to ask the people of Thetford about their starlings.



Kings House Garden used to be home to many starlings but on this day the Professor saw none.



In London the search continued, but where large roosts once lived there were only tourists and pigeons.



The city had huge flocks of people but no flocks of the small birds the Professor was looking for.



Even with no signs of starlings, the Professor learned much in the city of London.



In St. James's Park, Professor Starling saw many birds but none of them were starlings.



With little luck in Thetford and London, the Professor's search for starlings continued in Oxford.



He explored the city, keeping an eye out for birds.



Professor Starling asked the gardeners when they had last seen starlings.



At the Museum of Natural History the Professor ended the day thinking about another bird, the extinct dodo.

Some Thoughts on My Recent Travels in the United Kingdom

Recently, while engaged in ongoing research on my species, I came upon some facts that compelled me to undertake a journey of inquiry to the country of my ancestors. My line of the family *Sturnus Vulgaris* had emigrated, with some assistance from your species, to North America in the early 1890s, landing in New York City's Central Park at the invitation of a rather unusual and eccentric individual, one Eugene Schiefellin. It seems that Mr. Schiefellin had a desire that all of the songbirds appearing in the works of William Shakespeare should be brought to American shores. He also believed that the introduction of my species would be of great benefit to agriculturalists – a belief that was at the heart of the formation of the Acclimatization Society, which he had become local president of. Whether we have been of benefit remains open to debate. However, North America is a land where we have thrived and flourished; we have adapted to a wide variety of landscapes and habitats including dense urban areas and the sprawling suburbs with their extensive lawns and gardens.

I am sure, therefore, that you can appreciate my great shock in hearing that while my line of the family has prospered, our ancestral population in the United

Kingdom has been in steady decline. Over recent decades, *Sturnus Vulgaris* has suffered a mysterious and as yet unexplained decline in numbers in the range of seventy percent! As a learned itinerant scholar of all things avian, with a particular focus on extinction and adaptation to change, I felt it necessary to inquire for myself and to travel amongst the good people of England to find out if anyone had noticed these disappearances and, furthermore, what explanations they may offer for such a tragic occurrence. I undertook this journey of inquiry not only for my own edification and the good of my species, but to contemplate the wider significance of such changes. As is so often the case, dramatic changes in the patterns of nature have much broader significance and wider implications. The decline of a once common and numerous species suggests disturbances and disruptions that will very likely have serious impacts on other species, including, dear reader, your own.

My journey to the United Kingdom took me to three locations which were determined by the historical presence of significant numbers of European Starlings. First, the town of Thetford and the rural countryside of East Anglia where there is extensive agriculture and a number of small historic market towns. Second, the great city of London, particularly at its heart where large flocks of starlings had once chosen to gather. Third, the city of Oxford, with its ancient colleges and institutions

of learning and public education near which large murmurations are said to continue to gather. I was accompanied on these travels by individuals equally curious and concerned, Giles Lane and Hazem Tagiuri of Proboscis, Dr. Josephine Mills and Leila Armstrong from Lethbridge, Alberta, in the Canadian West, and my colleagues from DodoLab, Lisa Hirmer and Andrew Hunter, who continue to facilitate my travels and research. In each setting, our peregrinations took us to a variety of sites, from old churches and abandoned ruins and landscapes, to actively cultivated and constructed terrain, through museums and libraries, along high streets and amongst vibrant shops, and to places of great gatherings of people.

In each location, I set about to wander along a determined route yet allowed myself to follow the unexpected and to engage – whenever possible – with the public; to inform them of my program of inquiry, to determine their level of awareness and to ascertain if they could offer explanations or theories as to why my species is in decline and, if they wished, to offer connections to the plight of other species (including their own). During these outings I obviously kept an eye and ear out for my fellow starlings, watching the skies, the trees, expanses of green earth, and the hidden recesses of urban infrastructure, listening for our distinct warblings, twittering and songs, in hopes of spotting my kind locked in ancient patterns of routine

behaviour; probing the ground for food, chattering in the branches of regal trees and joining in the elegant choreography of dark murmurations. Sadly, my encounters with my species were minimal and fleeting, limited to the occasional spotting of a single bird and the lone encounter with a tiny flock of no more than thirty specimens clustered together above the gardens at Thetford's King's House, these seeming to frantically trace out an undulating form, trying to map out in the sky the silhouette of a much larger flock which had been previously described by the locals. I was informed that the weeks prior to my visit had been unseasonably cold and a number of locals were convinced that this may have triggered the departure of starlings from the area as flocks had been witnessed in advance of the frigid weather. While I am sceptical of this theory (weather is not normally a trigger of migration for our kind), I remain somewhat naive in these matters as long seasonal migrations are not a behaviour we in North America have widely engaged in.

This set of publications contains three volumes. This first volume, ***Perquisitions***, is offered as a brief explanation of the nature and rationale of the ***Thetford-London-Oxford*** expedition. I have invited my travelling companions to describe their interests and intentions here because, while they were accompanying me on my research, they also had distinct ideas they wished to pursue. Book 2,

Congeries, provides a collection of items and ideas accumulated on our travels. These are presented simply as an itemised collection of things of interest to us. The final book, ***Speculations***, provides the reader with our individual and collective thoughts on what is offered in ***Congeries***, with myself and my learned colleagues reflecting (through text and images) on the significance and meaning of what we saw and heard. It is here that I offer my thoughts on the various theories offered concerning the disappearance of *Sturnus Vulgaris*.

I began my journey at a largely forgotten rural church, an impressive stone structure with a Norman doorway situated on the edge of ploughed fields, adjacent to a naturally wooded area clustered around a cool stream. The ancient church, with its diminishing flock of parishioners, seemed an appropriate site to begin this journey of inquiry and loss. It is my hope that my many avian cousins (crows, rooks, ravens, magpies) who still populated that area are a sign that there is still hope for *Sturnus Vulgaris* but, sadly, I fear I left England thinking of those rare sightings of single starlings and the opening line of that old English rhyme echoing in my mind.

One for Sorrow...

Professor William Starling



European Starling or *Sturnus Vulgaris*
A wood-engraving by Thomas Bewick published in *History of British Birds [1797]*

Please find below excerpts from the journal of one Leila Armstrong, Canadian artist and general ne'er-do-well on the Professor Starling Expedition.

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada; Wednesday, December 14, 2011:

It is to be my first foray off the island of North America. In preparation, I turn to the most prestigious and comprehensive library on the island. While the building isn't much to look at, the tomes contained within the Interwebleian are extensive. I search the card catalogue for reference books under the headings "bizarre Britain," "haunted Thetford," "unusual Oxford," and "weird London."

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada; Friday, January 13, 2012:

The knowledge I gain during my frequent visits to the Interwebleian are proving invaluable, as my understanding of the expedition is sketchy at best. All the information comes to me via a single source, the intrepid curator and director Dr. Josephine Mills. I know we are to work with two dodos – birds I believe to be sphere-shaped, obtuse, and extinct – and Proboscis, a large nose prosthetic.

Glasgow, Scotland; Wednesday, February 8, 2012:

Mills and I travel via airship and arrive on the continent a week before we are to liaise with the rest of the team. We cross over into the most Northern country, Scotland, and establish ourselves at a boarding house situated beside the central train station in the bustling burg of Glasgow. Here we are perfectly situated to undertake some preliminary research on this strange new land.

Glasgow, Scotland; Thursday, February 9, 2012:

We begin with the Kelvingrove Institute, a sizeable castle-like structure housing a comprehensive range of art and antiquities collected by the locals. Here, I am much impressed by the skeleton of an Irish Elk (which they had charmingly mislabelled as a giant deer) and an exhibition on Australian tribal throat singers called AC/DC.

I am awestruck by the skeleton of the Irish elk, for it is not unlike the Canadian moose in many respects. Its scientific name is Megaloceros giganteus and, prior to the last glacial period, it roamed Eurasia standing over 6 feet tall, with an antler span of up to 12 feet. The Irish elks' extinction, some 8,000 years ago, is linked

to its size and inability to adapt, although many believe hunting by humans was also a major factor.

Edinburgh, Scotland; Saturday, February 11, 2012:

Eventually we make our way eastward to Edinburgh where we discover scores of magnificently mangy, threadbare taxidermied birds and mammals from the 18th and 19th century, housed in Scotland's National Institute for the Preservation of Objects and Ideas. They seem to enjoy hanging sea creatures from the ceiling here, having the space above one's head stand in for the ocean. I am worried I might drown. Mills and I discover a case containing a Dodo bird. After careful examination of the specimen, I can find no signs of life. I confirm it is extinct.

I am both captivated and disturbed by the stuffed Thylacine, the largest known carnivorous marsupial to have survived into the 20th century. I can't help but to run film footage of the last captured thylacine over and over in my head. There it is, in 1933, pacing in its Hobart Zoo pen in Tasmania. It yawns.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Monday, February 13, 2012:

Mills and I make our way southeast via steam engine and are met at a station in Cambridge by the dodos. They appear to be very much alive. The male, Andrew Hunter, is larger than the female, and far more gregarious. Although he too is Canadian, he seems quite adept at driving the people mover on the wrong side of the road. The female, Lisa Hirmer, is made completely out of marzipan but, despite this fact, seems intelligent and capable. Back in Canada she designed humidors for people with special needs. They drive us further east to a farm in Larling, Norfolk, our first jumping off point.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Tuesday, February 14, 2012:

I wake before Mills and stumble into the kitchen of the cottage in which we are now housed. Through the window I spy a most glorious 11th century church, St. Ethelbert's, two horses, and a flock of bustling creatures called Guinea Fowl. I wonder what the guinea fowl taste like.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Wednesday, February 15, 2012:

The dodos arrive early for what we believe will be the first appearance of Professor Starling, a bird who has made his way from Dundas, Ontario to the ancestral lands of his people. We leave the cottage to make our way to St. Ethelbert's hoping for an encounter and are not disappointed. There he is, patting the horses in the adjacent paddock.

I must pause here to describe the professor's physical appearance so you, dear reader, will understand our delight and amazement at spying him for the first time. He is a striking figure, standing 6 feet high, much taller than any other starling I have known. His head is round, in the typical fashion, with glistening black and blue-ish feathers, and a strong, shapely beak. However, he is a bit of a dandy, donning a grey felt top hat and attractive grey frock coat with handsome vest beneath. Once we introduce ourselves, he accompanies us to the church where we were able to study its Norman architectural features and striking flint stone façade.

Strangely, Hunter refuses to leave the cottage to meet the professor but rejoins us after the professor has departed. He then drives us to the ruins of the Warren Lodge.

I must stop myself from prattling on at length about the lodge and its surrounding landscape, for it is the most magnificent thing I have seen to date. Built in the 15th century, it protected gamekeepers and hunting parties from poachers. On the encompassing land are rolling, sandy hillocks created by the rabbits, farmed here for centuries. The mounds are covered in dense mosses and heather. Indeed, Hunter is concerned Hirmer might disappear beneath the surface from all her jumping up and down on their spongy surface.

Have I mentioned that the local landscape is thick with small, tusked deer?

Thetford, Norfolk, England; Friday, February 17, 2012:

Hunter leaves us with Hirmer in a Portuguese café in Thetford to retrieve the Proboscis from a train station in a neighboring town. Hirmer tells us of an elaborate dream she has had in which Hunter becomes Captain Deciduous, a tree-like super hero. I make a rendering of this Captain Deciduous in my sketchbook for further contemplation.

Hunter arrives with Proboscis, which, in turns out, is not a large nose prosthetic, but two male aboriginals. Giles Lane, the eldest, brings to mind an elfin

Captain Hook (of Peter Pan fame) with twinkling eyes and a handsome mustache. The other, Hazem Tagiuri, is significantly younger and resembles a tall, slender, ruddy cheeked first mate. I surmise that Proboscis is actually a tall sailing ship.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Saturday, February 18, 2012:

Yesterday, Hirmer, Mills, Lane, Tagiuri, and I spend the day in the company of Professor Starling. I notice that Hunter vanishes when the professor appears to us just northwest of the Priory ruins. I suspect he is afraid of the professor, although I cannot think why.

The professor is not at all shy and feels comfortable communing with the townsfolk. I witness an interaction on King Street, not far from the Bell Inn, where he speaks at length with a rather rough looking gentleman. I cannot convey the subject matter of their conversation, but the man seems quite animated, and the professor quite a good listener.

Mills and I then wander into an Ancient House on Whitehart Street where we meet a group of women who knit fantastical creatures. Amazingly, they have knowledge of the dodos and show us a woollen Great Bustard in a neighbouring room (they made the bird for Hunter and Hirmer the previous year). It is here I learn that the great bustard is the largest flying bird on earth and that it has been absent from the United Kingdom for 180 years. I feel a profound sense of sadness and loss and think on Professors Starling's plight to reconnect with his local ancestors. Will the starlings of Great Britain go the way of the great bustards? I can't imagine this happening, for starlings in Canada are considered pests, much in the same way thylacines were considered nuisances by the peoples of Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea over a century ago.

Some thoughts on our travels with Professor William Starling by ***Proboscis.***

– Introduction –

We're interested in the intangible – discovering, documenting and sharing awareness of the flow of crucial knowledge, skills, and stories that support and weave amidst the visible structures of societies. Where there are missing parts we cannot see, where there are lacunae, we seek to travel to the cavities, navigating the seemingly empty spaces and unheard tales of towns and cities that course through the rigid matrix of bone.

Learning of Professor Starling's research expedition we were inspired by the concept of migration, not just how animals or humans travel to more favourable pastures, but how ideas, perceptions and tales shift across lands and through layers of history, often losing fragments along the way. Traces of past settlements, pages from aged tomes, residues left behind from noted acts; these can help us to glean narratives from the niches. To inspire and create new ones.

Comparing life then with life now. Life there with life here. So that we may study the phenomenon of the human animal living with one another, under shelter, under rule, throughout the ages. Examining how the spaces we inhabit inform, and act

as a stage to perform, our creative endeavours that arise from both joy and strife alike – spurred by coping with barren lands, or the reveries in green grass on the other side.

– Thetford –

Thetford's deep history is a narrative riddled with uncertainties, one knitted with alluring threads of arcane lore. We hope to tease these out, investigating significant sites and objects that still resonate with the past, guided by information that circulates in the present, and by listening to peoples' accounts of disappearing sights, as told to Professor Starling.

The Priory drew pilgrims in the 13th century, after a supposed appearance of the Virgin Mary, and the discovery of a number of saints' relics in a statue of her likeness. A mass of crumbled flint walls and dissipated arches are all that remain. Can its former awe be glimpsed today, its minute traces lifted from the rubble?

Knowledge of this town, gained from archaeological evidence, is often followed by rumours. The Thetford Hoard, a collection of Romano-British jewellery and tableware unearthed in 1979, bears inscriptions and imagery that allude to paganism, and it's thought many of the items were crafted for their talismanic

properties – sulphur filled pendants to protect against evil spirits, magical words etched in gems. What historians have been able to deduce from this find is matched by the mystery that still surrounds it. Though this treasure has been deemed important enough to now reside in the British Museum, the discovery is shrouded by secrecy and inaccuracy, and it is widely suggested the hoard is incomplete.

We are intrigued by what the missing objects might be, stranded far from a collective array and interpretation. Perhaps we will find the modern treasures of Thetford; value transgressing from hard base metals to the transitory knowledge of skilled trades, or the fables uttered by elderly oracles of wisdom. Or is there more call for new stories, to populate the voids of the past?

– London –

London is our home. A hub of second-nature paths, furrowed by accumulated years of travelling through its streets. We want to revisit everyday sites accompanied by Professor Starling, walking in the wake of an outside observer, noticing new facets of the city through his curiosities and hearing stories from the margins, evoked by his esteemed presence. Like London, the Starling is a symbol of rapid growth and change, and can be used as a motif to trigger tales of influx and

displacement that often drift past us, masked by the smoke trails of frantic city life.

We're wondering how people will react to this unusual character in a place so versed in urban spectacle. Street performers earning a crust, contrived marketing stunts, festival troupes in all manner of costumes. Daily occurrences that pepper London life, both for those visiting briefly and those entrenched in it. Tourists might be more receptive, although less knowledgeable of its spaces. Are Londoners willing to stop and converse, or will the Professor have to target the easy strollers, the stationary workers, those in havens from the hubbub?

– Oxford –

In stark contrast to Thetford, Oxford is a city of sustained narratives, consciously preserved so that the next generation can inscribe their chapter. If the former is constructed from lore, then Oxford is law; not in any particular criminal justice sense, but as a unflinching force of academic institutions and traditions that govern the passage of knowledge through its scholars and students. The ensuing prominence of its aged structures and the influence of its prestige is the inverse of Thetford's ruins and its relative obscurity. However, is there room for stories that do not form part of curated collections?

Much has been spoken of the Town and Gown in Oxford, of the bad blood that inked the pages of its early academic history. Students in the middle ages were clad in vestments unsuitable for physical labour, clearly setting them apart from town folk, and were under the legal protection of the clergy from civil law. Subsequent abuses committed led to long tensions which no doubt fostered the violence of the Battle of St. Scholastica, which erupted on February 10, 1355, leaving approximately 93 dead. On that day every year until 1825, the town mayor and his councillors were required to proceed bareheaded through the town and pay a fine for every scholar killed. This humiliation must have withered the locals' pride in their town, or even encouraged their displacement.

We suspect the opposing forces we will find in Oxford today are not the academic and the townie, but the different exuding effects of privatised and public spaces, and of constructed and organically evolving narratives, on all of its citizens.

Through Professor Starling, an avian ambassador who is able to manoeuvre between the currents of accepted beliefs and common sensibilities, we hope to hear unfiltered thoughts – testimonies that break free from the vast murmuration.

– Hazem Tagiuri and Giles Lane of Proboscis.



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Professor Starling's Thetford-London-Oxford Expedition

Book 1: Perquisitions

Professor Starling and Associates

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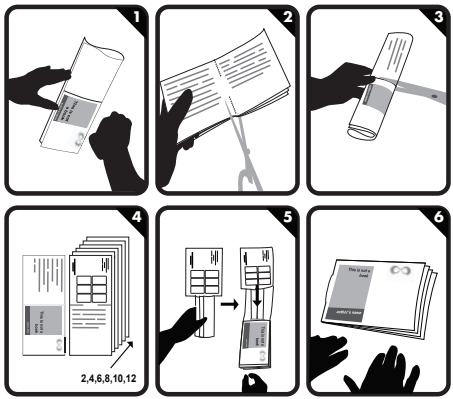

Congeries

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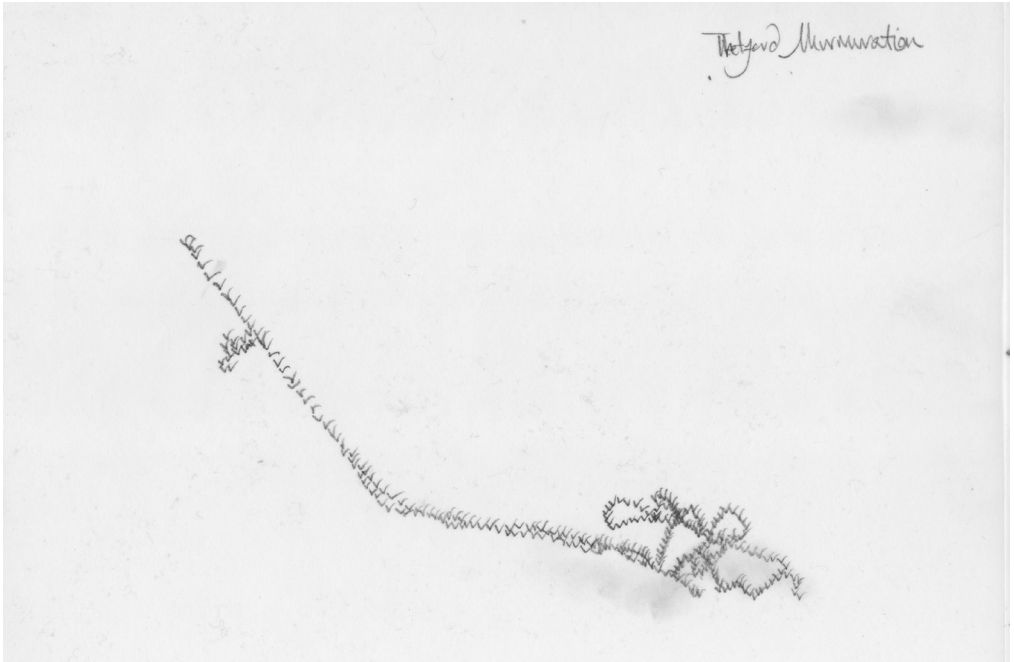
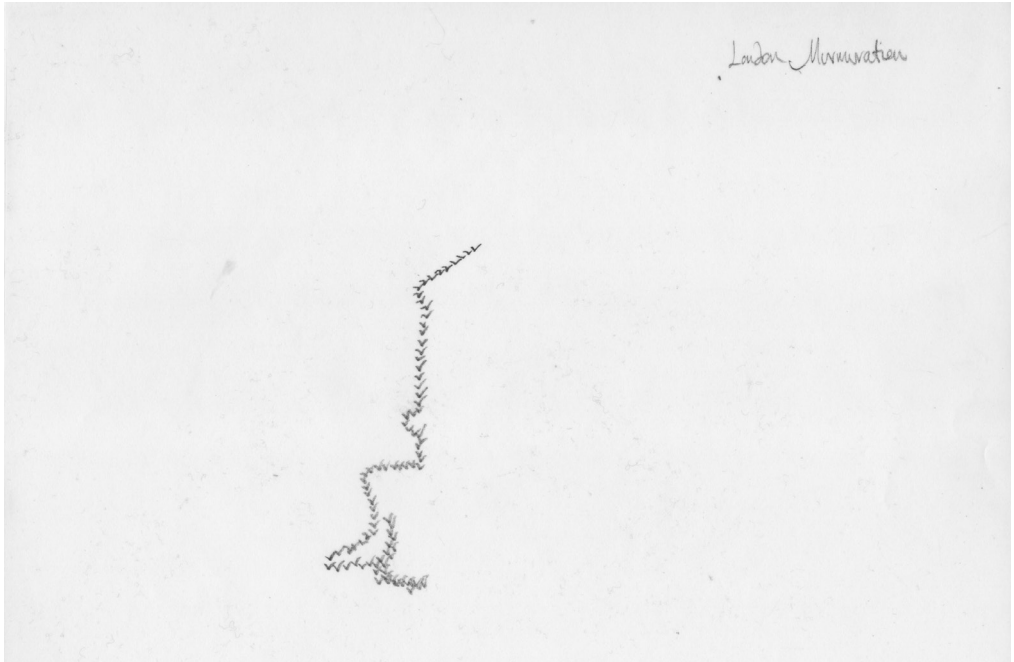
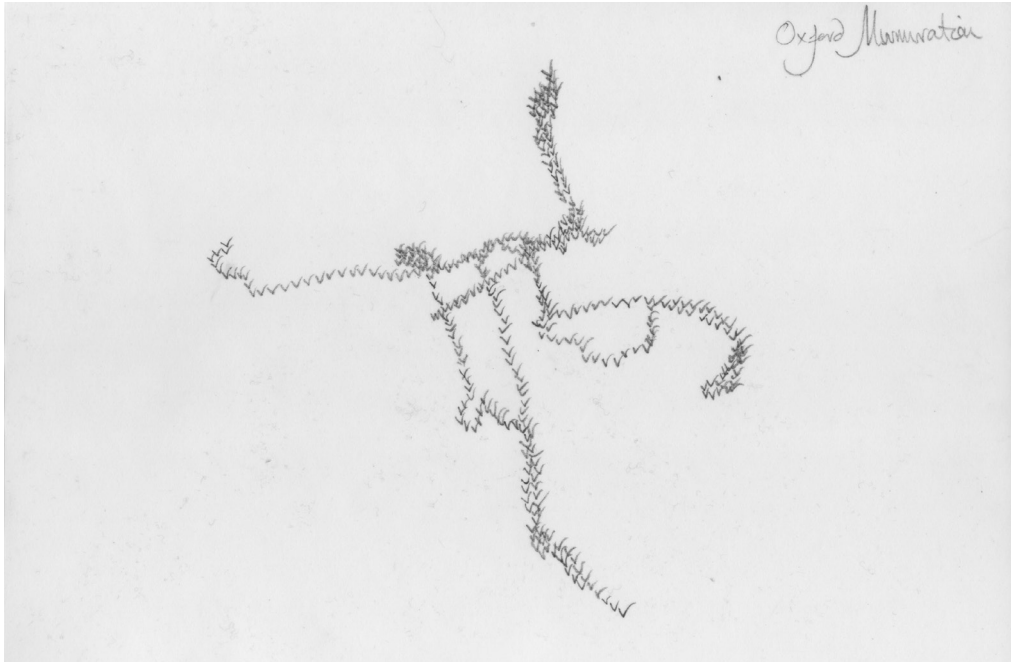
Congeries

The second volume in a series of three publications documenting the investigative excursions of Professor William Starling and his research team. This volume contains selected items and ideas collected during their research expedition in February, 2012.




London Murmuration


Oxford Murmuration



Item: Author's photo from "In Breckland Wilds" (W.G. Clarke, 1937), a book acquired for Prof. Starling in advance of visit to the United Kingdom and used as guide to Thetford area by research team.

Location Collected:

Acquired from a private rare book dealer in Rockland St. Peter, Norfolk, UK, by A.Hunter of DodoLab.

No. 01 Date: December 9, 2010



Item:

Relief rubbing from stonework on ruins of the Thetford Priory.

Location Collected:

Acquired by H. Tagiuri of Proboscis while visiting ruins with Prof. Starling research team, Thetford, Norfolk, UK.

No. 02 Date: February 16, 2012



Item:

Warrener's Lodge ruins, Rabbit Warrens (Neolithic earthworks?).

Location Collected:

Documented by Prof. Starling research team, Brandon Road, Warren Wood, Thetford, Norfolk, UK.

No. 03

Date: February 16, 2012



Item:

GHOST RABBIT

(as rendered by L. Hirmer)

Location Collected:

Near Warrener's Lodge ruins, Brandon Road, Warren Wood, Thetford, Norfolk, UK.

No. 04

Date: February 16, 2012



Item:

Aboriginal Artifacts from Western Canada

Location Collected:

Documented by J. Mills of Prof. Starling research team, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK.

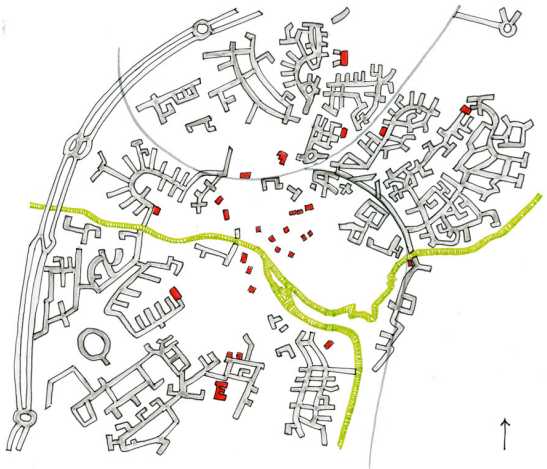
No. *05*

Date: *February 22, 2012*



THETFORD BEFORE
"LONDON OVERSPILL"

THETFORD AFTER
"LONDON OVERSPILL"



Item:

Thetford London Overspill/New Town expansion interpretive map.

Location Collected:

Documented by L. Armstrong of Prof. Starling research team, Ancient House Museum, Thetford, Norfolk, UK.

No. 06 Date: February 16, 2012



Item:

Tools of observation - citizens engaged in indescreet efforts to record Prof. Starling and research team at work.

Location Collected:

Documented by L. Hirmer of Prof. Starling research team, London and Oxford, UK.

No. 07 Date: February 20&22, 2012



Item:

A Muntjac Deer (introduced from China to UK in early c20th century). Heard about but never sighted by research team in Thetford Forest.

Location Collected:

A stuffed specimen documented by Prof. Starling in the collection of the Horniman Museum, London, UK

No. 08

Date: February 25, 2012



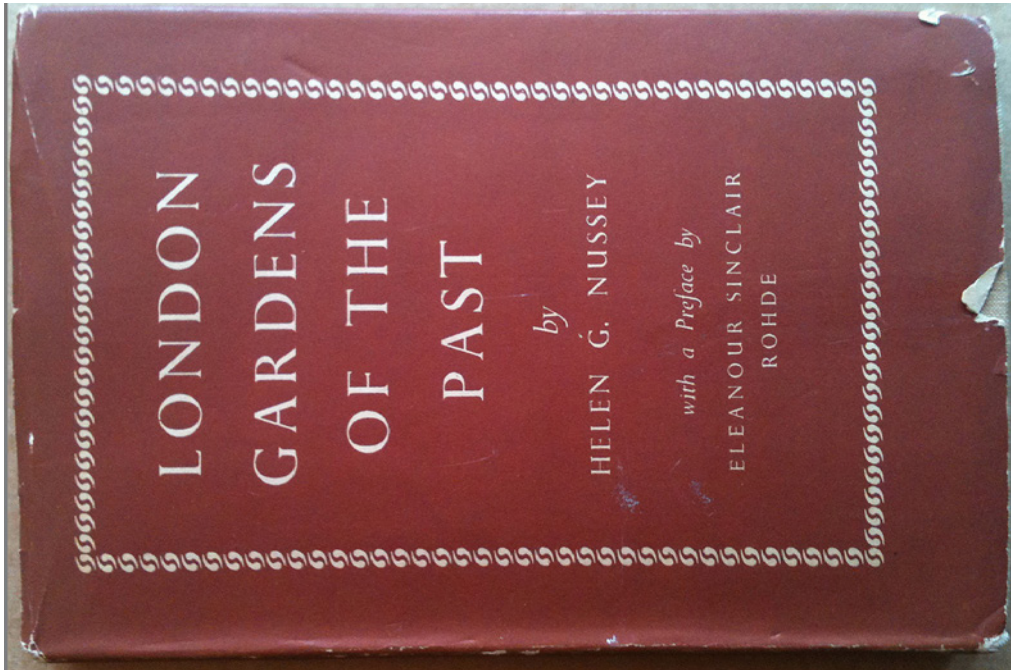
Item: 18th century hand-coloured etching of Porcupine of Hudson's Bay, British North America (now Canada).

*Prof. Starling noted that the artist had clearly not seen such an animal in person.

Location Collected:

Acquired by Prof. Starling (along with an illustration of a Great Auk) from a rare book and print dealer, High Street, Oxford, UK.

No. 09 Date: February 22, 2012



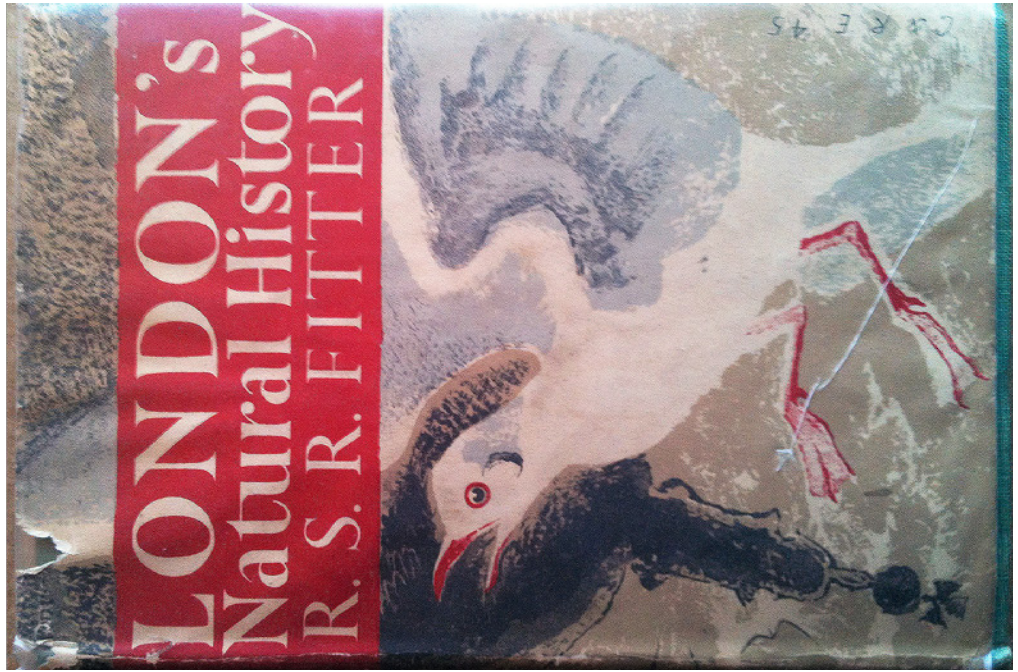
Item: "London Gardens of the Past", a book by Helen G. Nussey, published by John Lane* (1937).

(*not a known relation of Giles Lane of Proboscis and Prof. Starling research team)

Location Collected:

Acquired by Prof. Starling from a rare book and print stall in Gloucester Green Market, Oxford, UK.

No. 10 Date: February 22, 2012



Item: "London's Natural History",
a book by R.S.R. Fitter, New Naturalists
Series No.3 (1945).
(which contains details of the once
great starling murmurations in London)

Location Collected:

Acquired by A.Hunter for Prof.
Starling from Black Cat Books, Lennoxville,
Quebec, CANADA.

No. 11 Date: January 26, 2012



Item:

A selection of museums of the United Kingdom, with particular emphasis on display techniques and methodologies of interpretation, preservation and curation.

Location Collected:

Acquired by J. Mills and L. Armstrong of Lethbridge, Alberta, CANADA, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Oxford, London, Norwich...

No. 12

Date: Febraury, 2012

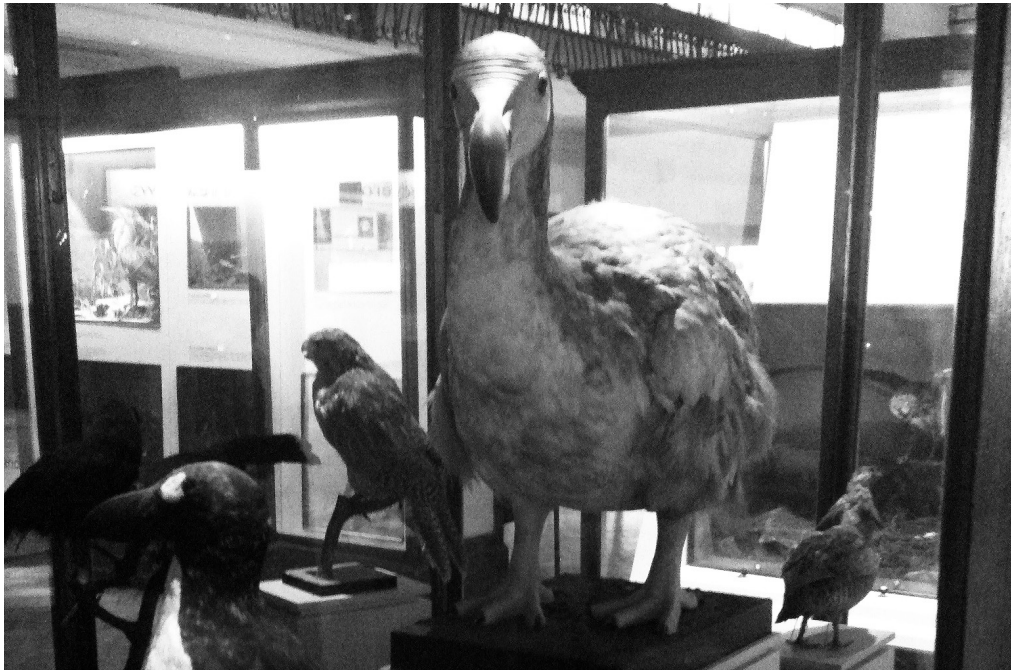


Item: A peculiar story of the witnessing of a murmuration of starlings taking the form of a dolphin that split into two flocks, the second of which formed a shark which set about to "devour" the dolphin and, in so doing, returned all to a single murmuration.

Location Collected:

As told to Prof. Starling by a curious young woman (a cyclist of Spanish origins) while the professor was strolling around the duck pond in St. James's Park, London, UK

No. 13 Date: February 20, 2012



Item:

An assortment of extinct species, stuffed, mounted and preserved (often only in skeletal form)

Location Collected:

Documented by research team at various fine museums (including Horniman, Oxford Mus. of Nat. Hist., Norwich Castle...)

No. 14

Date: February 16-25, 2012



Item:

"They were eaten by cats", an unusual theory concerning the disappearance of Sturnus Vulgaris (European Starlings).

Location Collected:

As told to Prof. Starling by citizens of the town of Thetford while strolling on the High Street, Thetford, Norfolk, UK.

No. 15

Date: February 16, 2012



Item: "All of the bugs they eat have been killed by the many more cars and cabs around Trafalgar Square", a rather odd theory for the disappearance of the once great murmurations of Sturnus Vulgaris (European Starling) from central London.

Location Collected:

As told to L. Hirmer of DodoLab by a gentleman (of Scottish origins), St. James's Park, London, UK.

No. 16 Date: February 20, 2012



Item: "The have gone elsewhere (because of the recent cold spell)", a highly plausible theory explaining the absence of Sturnus Vulgaris (European Starlings) from Oxford, UK..

Location Collected:

As told to Prof. Starling by local farmers at Gloucester Green Market, Oxford, UK.
(variations of this tale also heard at various locations by L. Hirmer of DodoLab in London and Thetford.)

No. 17 Date: February 22, 2012

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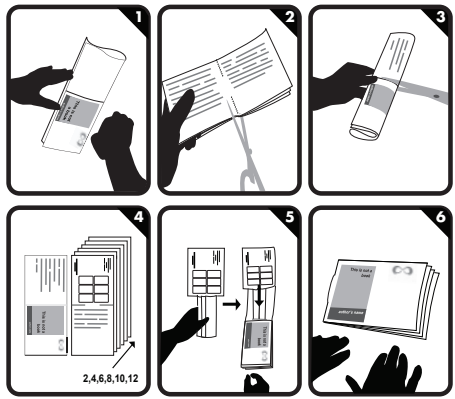


Speculations

being the third volume of investigations, observations and musings collected on the

Thetford • London • Oxford

expedition led by

Professor William Starling of DodoLab

accompanied by

Leila Armstong, Lisa Hirmer, Andrew Hunter, Giles Lane, Josie Mills & Hazem Tagiuri

Speculations

The third volume in a series of three publications documenting the investigative excursions of Professor William Starling and his research team. This volume contains reflections and speculations on items and ideas contained in ***Congeries*** (Vol. II).

Further Thoughts on My Recent Travels in the United Kingdom

Dear Friends,

It has taken me some time to reflect on all that was revealed to me during my recent travels in the United Kingdom and I now find myself in the midst of a discreet visit to the city of New York, to further my investigations of my species' history in America and to hopefully unearth some new specifics concerning the life of one Eugene Schieffelin, the peculiar gentlemen who introduced my species to North America. I write to you from the Deborah, Jonathan F. P., Samuel Priest, and Adam R. Rose Main Reading Room in the Stephen A. Schwartzman Building of the New York Public Library (at 5th Avenue and 42nd Streets) where I have been perusing old volumes, city directories, maps, plans and photographs, to attempt to situate Mr. Schieffelin, to identify his places of residence and business in Manhattan at the time of my species' introduction to this city in the early 1890s. I have also been investigating and noting the extensive presence of my kind throughout this great metropolis, even spotting one extremely fortunate Sturnus Vulgaris barely escaping the clutches of a Red Tailed Hawk over the sylvan paths of Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, the location of the remains of Eugene Schieffelin and his spouse Catherine

(*nee* Hall). But all this research is for the future, part of my plans to return later this autumn to the city and, as in England, to undertake a public perambulation of inquiry. I have also been out and about in Hamilton and Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and will share the related outcomes and observations in other formats. For now, I will return my thoughts to the old country.

The purpose of my trip to the United Kingdom, as stated in volume one of this set of booklets, was to inquire as to the fate of European Starlings in their traditional surroundings and to further draw forth from the citizenry an explanation for our shocking decline. The locations my research colleagues and I visited held historical significance to starlings, all being notable places of substantial gatherings in the past. What I heard from the people kind enough to speak with me were some truly surprising and unusual theories and I will share with you one tale of explanation from each of the locales we visited: Thetford, London and Oxford. I will follow this with some recently published scientific research of the most startling and complex order.

Thetford, Norfolk

What a lovely little town this was, with its ancient structures and earthworks,

a simple place to visit as one can easily stroll along the river and into the town centre, engaging at leisure with the locals along a high street closed to automobile traffic. I was particularly struck by the openness of Thetfordians, their willingness to share with a curious stranger not only their thoughts on my kind but to even draw parallels within their population, offering stories of continuing migration (of people and enterprise), as well as habitat decline and struggles to adapt to change. It was of great interest to me that often within their stories of change in Thetford, there was a tendency to identify a culprit, a single protagonist on whose shoulders one could lay blame (those who came with the London Overspill/New Town scheme in the 1960s or the far more distant events surrounding the loss of the cathedral to Norwich and occasionally the mediaeval plague). It seemed fitting, therefore, that one tale of explanation that seemed to resonate with my colleagues and I was a bold suggestion that it was cats, both domestic and feral, that could be ultimately responsible for the decline of my kind in the Thetford area. Now, please believe me, I do not count felines amongst my close acquaintances and confidants and while I would certainly take some satisfaction in painting these creatures as being a leading perpetrator of avian destruction (which I am confident to do in the case of dodos and other, now extinct, defenceless island species), it seems highly unfair to do so in this case. To

be responsible for such a large decrease in my population there would have to be a staggeringly high number of cats on the prowl and, more importantly, my species is not greatly susceptible to such predations. How often we look to blame another, to find a simple answer to the complex problems we are the authors of. My species is often given soul credit for the damage done to the populations of Eastern Blue Birds in North America and while we have come to accept some responsibility for this regrettable occurrence, it is far more likely a complex mix of factors (habitat loss caused by your species being chief among them) that has doomed my attractive relation. Need I remind you as well that, to the best of my knowledge, we starlings did not initiate the process of emigration (although it is possible that my research into Mr. Schieffelin's motives may prove otherwise).

London

Such a challenging place to start a conversation or to draw attention to oneself! Unlike Thetford, the great city of London appears both aloof and preoccupied with its own sense of greater purpose; dense flocks of citizens and tourists flow with such momentum through the streets, their gazes fixed defiantly forward, rarely making eye contact. On occasion, one would attempt to discreetly

photograph me and should I take this as a sign to engage, they would most often scurry away or duck into an open passageway. What did they fear I wonder? Perhaps they assumed I had some other purpose, to sell them something or promote some cause is my guess. I found that in order to initiate a dialogue I would do what any visitor to the city might be inclined to, simply ask for directions (not really necessary in my case as I had very much familiarized myself with the metropolis but it was, in the end, an effective ruse). As you may be aware, we starlings are great mimics and so to perform the role of a visitor in need of guidance was not a difficult task – I must say it proved rewarding as the English are so polite when put on the spot and greatly pleased when asked to assume a position of authority and knowledge. I am very grateful to those who were obviously employed in maintaining the city or were attired for commerce and civil service for their generosity in sharing knowledge. Many, sadly, were unaware of the history of starlings in the centre of the city and most often became distracted by a current avian situation involving the vast numbers of pigeons, a bird even I will admit is not discreet in its presence or modest in its population, but then we are all doing our best to get by and to prosper.

It was not until I reached the confines of St. James Park that the nature of my interactions with the public became more relaxed and casual and where I did not

feel the need to adopt an air of ignorance to establish contact with those out enjoying the warm sun and elegance of the surroundings. As in Thetford, I was approached often while exploring the park with its lovely water features, gardens and feathered residents. Some of you may appreciate being informed that it was within this very park that King Charles II introduced the Canada Goose from America in 1665. It was here that I was fortunate enough to stroll for some time with a young woman on a bicycle, who shared a most fascinating tale of witnessing a murmuration of starlings take the form of a dolphin that then transformed into a devouring shark! Our time together was, I must confess, partly defined by our mutual efforts to gauge the other's sanity. But this was not the specific story I wished to share. A more considered attempt to explain the disappearance of the mighty flocks of starlings that once gathered daily around Trafalgar Square was offered by a Scottish man to my good colleague Miss Lisa Hirmer. According to this kind gentlemen of Gaelic ancestry, the true culprit is the increased automobile traffic in the city centre which he proposed was destroying all of the flying insects he believed were the staple of the starlings' diet! While the demise of insects due to traffic is plausible, it can hardly explain the disappearance of the once vast evening murmurations as we, firstly, do not primarily dine on airborne insects (as our cousins the swifts and swallows do) and, secondly,

our presence in the city centre was for the purpose of gathering to roost, not feed. As in many urban areas, where we gather to sleep is distinct from where we seek out sustenance. Like your kind, we are adaptable to a commuter lifestyle.

Oxford

You will not be surprised to hear that, as a professor, I found Oxford a very delightful, comfortable and satisfying place to visit and navigate. How helpful the students of this great university town were, how willing to pause and give directions to a humble visitor and to welcome one of equal education and academic commitment into their midst amongst such lofty institutions of learning. My path of inquiry was very specific on this day and I had chosen, in consultation with my research companions, to visit several distinct sites in addition to the general surrounds of the university and town. These included the Botanic Gardens, the Oxford Museum of Natural History and the Gloucester Green Public Market, locations where I believed my inquiries might be met by individuals more "informed" due to profession or field of study and, in the case of the first two, where the historic logic of the place reflected your species' conviction that you could fully understand and control the natural world. (I also took advantage of my situation and visited the

fine antiquarian print and map dealer Sanders of Oxford where I acquired a lovely representation of a Porcupine from Hudson's Bay.) I must say that I particularly enjoyed the fine welcome I received at the Museum of Natural History where I was given the opportunity to consider their many informative displays, to chat with school children (how fondly I recall such school outings of my youth) and to consider that specimen the museum is so well known for and which profoundly inspired Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (who you may know as Lewis Carroll, author of the Alice stories). I am of course referring to the dodo. It was a melancholy experience to pause, along with various other museum patrons, and contemplate the sad demise of such a noble bird whose reputation has for so long been besmirched and tarnished by misinformation and ignorance, even accused of being responsible for its own fate (as if it had chosen its own vulnerable form).

The gardeners at the Botanic Gardens and the vendors at the market were quite receptive to my visitation and offered a surprising consistency in their explanations and speculations concerning the fate of my species, an explanation, unlike those offered in Thetford and London, that could be interpreted as either aloofness or based on well-earned knowledge. The once common flocks may have "gone elsewhere" I was told, may have simply migrated or even relocated due to a

recent cold snap. In my mind, this explanation seemed a little thin, though in fairness there had been an unseasonal cold spell in previous weeks and starlings have clearly gone elsewhere and thrived (I am a fine example of such). Wandering back to catch the evening train to London with my colleagues, I was left haunted by that phrase, "gone elsewhere" and was overcome with a profound sadness I have been unable to fully overcome. How could the disappearance of a species that once flocked in such great numbers be explained with such vagueness and not be noted with more alarm? Your species often engages in such deferral, convenient deflections of the obvious. I am reminded of the Passenger Pigeon whose massive flocks would take hours to pass overhead. When Europeans first arrived in North America, the total population of passenger pigeons equalled one quarter of all indigenous bird species. It has been said that the reason no one noticed that this once abundant creature was being pushed to extinction was the assumption the they must simply have "gone eslewhere." What if the passing of you, your family, your community, your species, went unnoticed?

Where Are We Really?

I must admit that while I returned from the United Kingdom enlightened, I remain naive as to the true cause of the dark fate of my home country cousins, a

cause that I speculate is far more complex than a single narrative could convey. Prior to my travels I in fact came across this fascinating (yet to me horrifying) possibility offered by Bridget Stutchbury in her publication *The Private Lives of Birds* (Walker and Company, 2010). She suggests that starlings in the Southwest of England have been dining on earthworms contaminated with Bisphenol A (from pollution leached from water treatment plants, a favoured gathering place of Sturnus Vulgaris). The result of such a diet is raised estrogen levels in my male brethren. And here's the rub, while the contaminated worms make males less healthy and less likely to successfully reproduce, it will also make us males much better and louder singers, hence far more appealing to our potential mates who have evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to prefer strong singers as this was once a sign of paternal health and vigour. So we have, as illustrated by my research colleague Leila Armstrong, the image of the ***Starling Castrati***.

My journeys and research continue and I hope that your kind will invest such energy as Miss Stutchbury exhibits in pursuing the hard truths, to not be satisfied with stories of marauding felines and automobile induced insect devastations to explain the demise of a once abundant species in your midst. More worrisome would be to hear more consoling pronouncements of "gone elsewhere". I accept

and shoulder the burden of a certain amount of accountability for negative impacts caused by my species' introduction to North America and equally fear for the possible passing of my ancestral populations from that Green and Pleasant Land.

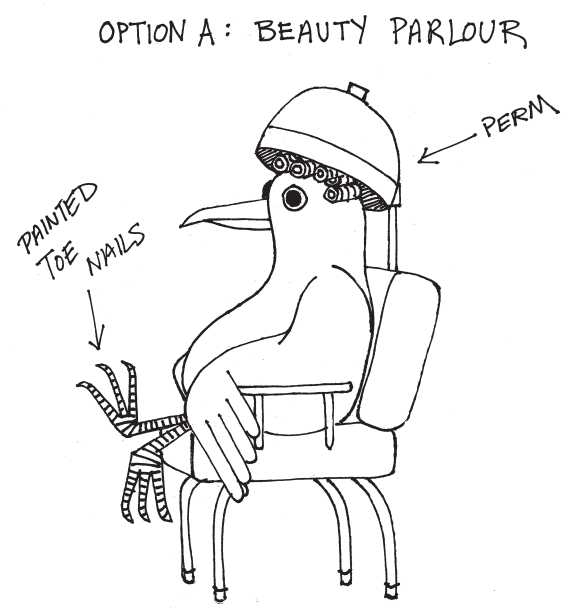
I will now return to my newly secured lodgings in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where I am pleased to say I am surrounded by an abundance of my fellow starlings. I will continue to venture forth on perambulations of inquiry, to engage your species in a dialogue of mutual benefit and to come to a deeper understanding of our respective fates. I will continue to visit your museums and record the scattered remains of my fellow species who have become extinct, and I encourage you to do the same, to imagine your kind in such a display. I thank you for your interest and encourage your correspondence.

Sincerely,

Professor William Starling

Speculations by Leila Armstrong

The following set of renderings by this fine artist from Lethbridge, Alberta, in Canada's majestic western lands, represent speculations on where starlings go when they are not seen in their traditional haunts as well as depictions of theories concerning the starlings' demise offered by the good citizens of England.



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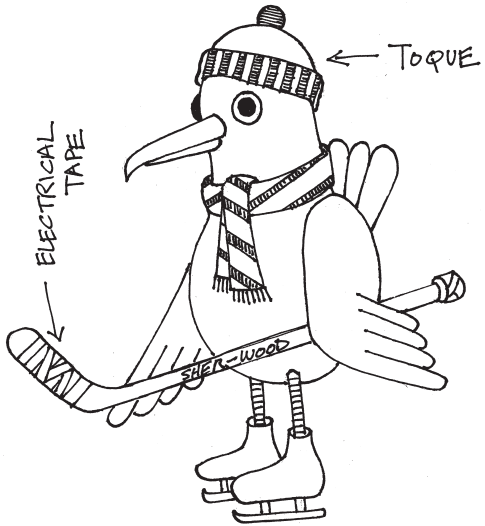

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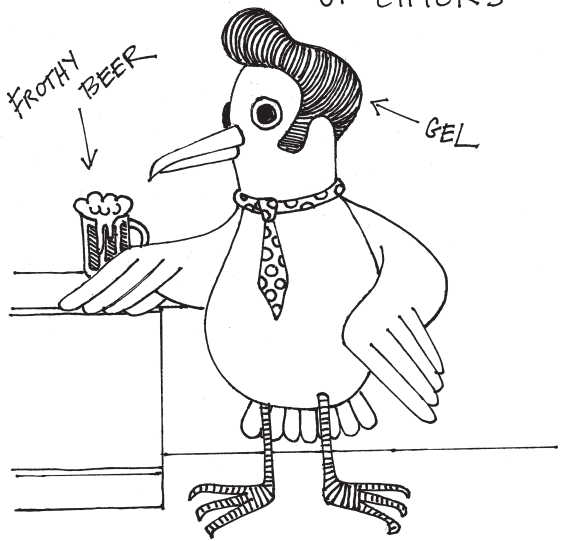

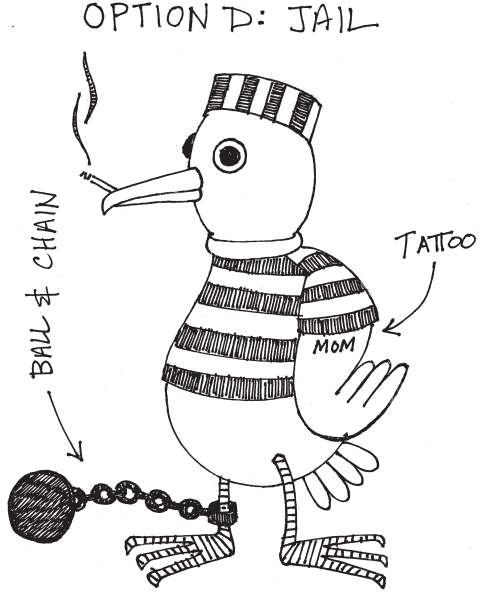
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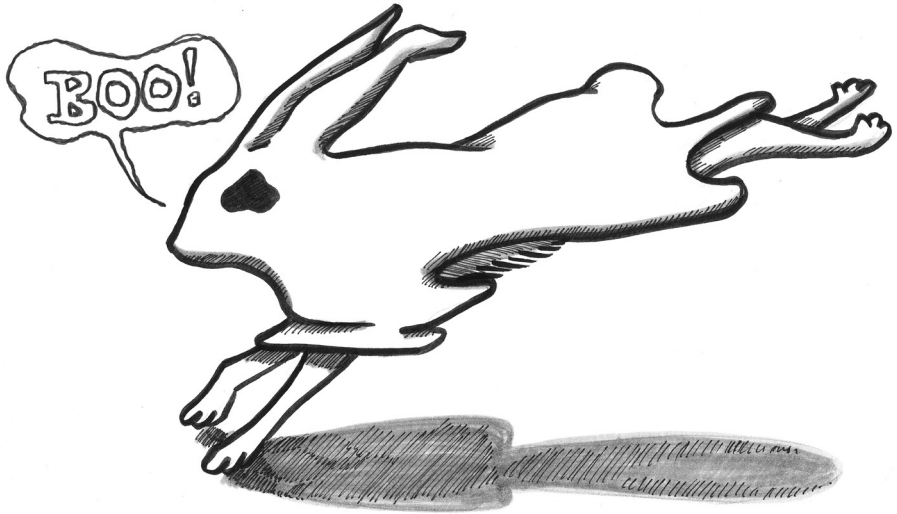
BALL & CHAIN
TATTOO
MOM


The Castrati
Starling


BOO!




SPLAT!


I DREAMT I
WAS A FLOCK
OF STARLINGS.
I DREAMT
I DEVOURED
YOU WHOLE.

The Pulpware Hoard

by Giles Lane and Hazem Tagiuri of Proboscis

No one could say quite exactly why the messages appeared, or what they meant. In much the same way as we attempt to decipher dreams in the polarity of our waking life, clutching at tangled bundles of surreal imagery to unravel their significance, true clarity is ultimately elusive. However, what is undeniable is the range of opposing theories spouted by those individuals who discovered them. Not that we should suppose this surprising if we consider the unique personalities and circumstances of each case. Nor if we consider the well-known phenomenon of contradictory eye-witness testimonies. Nevertheless it seems that humans prefer their own singular truths. It is a rare soul indeed who is content with utter mystery. For in the absence of certainty, do we not devise our own creation myths?

The conduits for these messages were everyday objects of Thetford Pulpware, a recycled material formed from pulped wood, bagging, rags and fibres; boiled, shredded and compacted, withered to a dense husk of matter. After being slathered in oil to provide water resistance, then decorated, the final products were thus inconceivably detached from their humble beginnings – as if subjected to a kind of industrial alchemy.

During World War Two this process was introduced to less banal leftovers of the material realm. Secret documents were brought to Thetford under armed escort to be bleached and rendered, cleaving apart reams of hard-won knowledge and desperate pleas like the splitting of bonds between atoms. Churchill's cabinet papers. Orders from the Imperial General Staff. Enigma intercepts. Ministry of Supply requisitions. Diplomatic cables. All these and more joined the vast, whirling slurry and were transmuted into Pulpware. It's funny to think that even scripts for 'Radio Londres' broadcasts from the BBC to Nazi-occupied France, riddled with coded messages for SOE agents and the Resistance, were flung into the vats, their subversive poetries flowing into a hoard of innocuous teacups, plates, jugs – even helmets.

"Ici Londres ! Les Français parlent aux Français…"

What couldn't be foreseen then was the shifting environmental conditions in decades to come. A cabal of intangible and overlapping forces, managing to galvanise a few random sentences miraculously spared from oblivion. Like Lazarus, words rose to the surface, transcending tombs cast in pulp. To those who toiled in

the Thetford mills this would seem as unlikely as turning gold back into lead. But the concept of a radioactive cloud, an ozone layer ravaged by solar flares, or acidic fog; all would have sounded just as fantastical.

So, in late April 1986, when irradiated plumes from the fallout of Chernobyl were swept towards the East Anglian coast, tainting the soil with exotic particles, residents of Thetford had no idea that this was why their taps had begun to yield water with a slightly odd taste. When masked with heady infusions of Earl Grey, only a master tea taster could tell something was amiss.

One tearoom, down a quiet side street in the town centre, had exclusively been using cups and saucers made in the nearby pulp plant. Patrons of the establishment, especially the daily congregations of elderly women, relished these artefacts for their inherent value of thrift which, alongside a mistrust of 'la-di-da' fine china, brought forth memories of proudly coping during the tough times of the war. Peering into their cups on a Monday afternoon, one such group saw strange marks amongst the milk-marbled dregs. They weren't stains or sunken crumbs as was first thought, but strings of distorted words, stretched and smeared around the base ring. The abstract inscriptions faded before they could be deciphered by most, but Vera Mulden, 86, claimed she could interpret, squinting through cat-eye glasses as if

divining fate through the tea-leaves in her cup. 'La fortune vient en dormant' might have looked like an exquisitely unreadable script, but Vera's half-remembered French and unscrupulous gaze allowed her to loudly proclaim: "Fortune comes in sleep!".

The missives were to reappear countless times throughout the week, bringing pilgrims eager to witness readings by the oracle of the tearoom. Dedicated Christians said these must be edicts from God, materialising in objects like the face of their saviour. Those fascinated by the stars argued that they were clearly extra-terrestrial communications, and that the huge mound of Castle Hill held an ancient stranded spacecraft within its belly.

In the final few days of the apparitions, several people noticed that the readings had started to sound eerily similar to those channelled previously. It was almost as if Vera was recycling a dozen statements; changing a word or two, or the supposed meaning. Then, just before any suspicions could manifest, the messages stopped, bleeding away for good. For a while, the folk of Thetford continued to seek out Vera as she sat in residence at the tearoom, demurely hoping for the wonder to return. It had passed.

* * *

When messages appeared in London in February 2011, nearly 25 years later, Batan Farley was the opposite of an oracle. He had somehow acquired a Pulpware jug at a debauched party in Shoreditch the previous night, and was now looking with slight amusement as it stood framed by the window. He guessed that a friend had donated the jug for irony value, to contrast with an array of strategically placed design-ware in his converted warehouse flat, but he couldn't be certain – he felt frazzled. By dawn, he had been half-awake all night as the after-effects of the party subsided, drifting in and out of awareness as the radio stuttered a news report of a massive solar flare a few days before. As morning rays bathed the jug in light, their oblique angles casting long, languorous shadows, a text unfolded across its upper rim like freshly typewritten ink.

'The bird sings with its fingers'.

Within minutes it had vanished. In his muddled state Batan didn't find this unusual. As a veteran New Media advertising consultant of almost three years, his first thought was that this must be some sort of elaborate PR stunt; teasing brand announcements seeded in hilariously worthless junk. But wirelessly activated with

Twitter! That was new, even for him.

'The mirrors would do well to reflect again'.

None of his friends were around to observe the subsequent messages, occurring twice a day. Dawn and sunset were hardly conducive hours for Batan's quasi-bohemian crowd. He couldn't find a covert press release on the net, nor any insider rumours to confirm his theory, either. They stopped appearing by the fourth evening, but still he watched. Two days more of sitting by the window until, his mind wrecked by sleep deprivation and skewed with paranoia, he decided it must all be a cruel hoax. Batan wrenched open the window, lashed the jug outside, and finally retreated to his bed. Curiously, he seemed to forget this turn of events later on. When asked about this 'phase' in jest by a friend, he replied that he was too busy to remember what had happened last week, let alone a month ago. Life was streaming by, apparently.

* * *

Let's progress in another direction. Halt the procession of time and retrace back to another era. 1970 heralded the worst year for air pollution in the United Kingdom. Sulphurous gases billowed from coal stations into the atmosphere, spawning clouds ripe with chemical vapours. Acid rain. In some cases, when examined, raindrops had the same pH level as vinegar. But it was harmless looking fog that acted as a catalyst for the earliest incidence of Pulpware communiqués, when thick acidic mist enveloped Oxford in January of that year.

Susan Weld, a Senior Research Fellow in Physics at Oxford University, had just come from a study group in her unusual and almost unprobed research field of Transient Psychodynamics. She was particularly keen on the notion of using telepathy – if it could be harnessed – to implant knowledge and ideas in students' minds, drastically reducing teaching time and ensuring that the grand weight of the university's legacy and its ideals were handed down successfully. Her theory proposed that the thoughts of the most genius, esteemed members of the institution would be able to emanate from the brain and be directed at will. Naturally, she considered herself to be the perfect candidate to test this, alongside several first-year volunteers, narrating simple, stock sentences in her mind and seeing if the other subjects received them. Unfortunately the results were, as yet, inconclusive.

Returning to her home on the outskirts of the city, atop a classic Triumph motorcycle and clad in a Pulpware 'Centurion' helmet, Susan drove directly through swells of low-lying acid fog, though she was too preoccupied with why the session had failed to notice. On the threshold and looking for her wayward keys, she became fixated on the helmet nestled in the crook of her arm. Not because of its uncanny newfound sheen, but the imprinted confession that "John has a long moustache". It was her eureka moment. Clearly, she thought, her intended messages from the study group had simply been delayed. It had taken time for them to be transmitted, leaving a garbled residue on the solid matter of her helmet. The technique would need refining, but this was irrefutable proof of her theory. If not, what else could it be?

* * *

Those who struck upon the treasure of the Pulpware only witnessed the final step of a process, one link in a complex chain of events. Limited by a stubborn grip on the tangible, our human perception glimpses the merest fragments of a sequence. The rest, we concoct.



Speculations: a few scenes after meeting Professor Starling

- As offered by Dr. Josephine Mills and Leila Armstrong

Scene 1
Shop frequented by the old man we met in St. James's Park

Shopkeeper: *Lovely day. Feels like spring has arrived.*

Old Man: *Yes, it does. It was a perfect day for a walk in the park.*

Shopkeeper: *The birds must be lively, waking up from winter.*

Old Man: *Indeed, it is the time of year for our visitors to pass through as they migrate. Mind you, not many come into London anymore. But I did meet a Professor Starling and had a nice chat with his students about starlings. They wanted to know what happened to all the starlings we used to see here.*

Shopkeeper: *How odd, a professor named Starling who studies starlings.*

Old Man: *Oh no, no coincidence at all, the professor is a starling. Wonderful fellow, very learned. Beautiful plumage. Keen students.*

Shopkeeper: *(silent)*

Old Man: *He's Canadian.*

Scene 2
Interior dialogue, woman cycling through St. James's Park

I'm walking. I'm riding. I'm peddling. I'm biking.
Sun is lower. Sun is warm and there is a green fuzziness starting to emerge. I'm on the path now, in the park. Off the roads with their shiny black metal glass reflecting people on sidewalks and in the road.
Buds on trees. Soft delicate hairs of yellowy grass poking up.
There's a man ahead. A man, but he's different. He's not a man. He's a bird.
A large shiny blue-black speckled sharp beaked bird. He's a starling!

I talk to him and he listens. He listens and he understands like no else can understand because he is one of them. He is a starling.
I've seen it. The prophecy. A sky filled with a flock, an immense beautiful flock. But then it shifts and divides. It alters and becomes two greater wholes: a thousand flapping wings that make a dolphin and a shark. Beating and flapping in the unison of two distinct wholes.
They are huge and black and beautiful these two. One gentle and moderate. One fierce and powerful. The second, the shark, turns and devours the first. Turns and devours, breaking up the things that have come together to make something exquisite. It crashes through it, biting and ripping and overwhelming.

Scene 3
Around the supper table in the home of one of the group of school children we met in Oxford's botanical gardens.

Mum: *How was your day today? What did you learn in school?*

Boy: ***It was wicked! We went to the Botanical Gardens and I talked to a starling.***

Dad: ***You know starlings can't speak, right?***

Boy: *This one could. He was as big as you and wore a nice suit.*

Parental exchange of glances.

Dad (carefully): ***You know what we have discussed about the difference between reality and imagination, right?***

Boy: ***No really, he had a waistcoat and a beautiful grey top hat. And he knew all about starlings and the environment.***



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Professor Starling's Thetford-London-Oxford Expedition

Book 3: Speculations

Professor Starling and Associates

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