

# Starlings

*Heavy hooves pound the well-trodden track. With two riders, the going is slow and the galloping steed puffs in the chill air, but the growing darkness is a friend, shrouding the intent of the young lovers. A glint of moonshine on water punctures the thin mist and signals that they have reached the Solway Firth and the River Esk that marks the boundary between England and Scotland. Another mile and they will be in Scotland and just a little further to the blacksmith's place. It shouldn't take long to pay the fee, seal their vows over the anvil and then they will be wed. Nothing can stop them now, except...*

...except, once her father realizes they are both missing he will be in hot pursuit. He disapproved of her new suitor from the start and careless talk of marriage will have left him in no doubt where they are headed...Gretna Green!

The small village of Gretna Green is renowned as the place where runaway lovers wed and its history of romance and intrigue has made it a world-famous wedding destination. The reason for this dates back to 1754 when Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act became law in England and Wales. Among other things, the law stipulated that those younger than twenty-one needed parental consent to marry. In Scotland, boys could marry at 14 and girls at 12 without consent.

For a fee, Gretna Green blacksmiths would provide witnesses and perform a quick ceremony at the anvil. Runaway weddings took place all along the border, but its location meant that, for many, Gretna Green was the easiest place to wed. Today, the Gretna Green area still hosts more than five thousand weddings annually and attracts thousands of

international tourists.

Gretna Green also sees another massive influx of visitors every year. From late autumn, one of the largest gatherings of starlings in the country can be seen performing their amazing aerobic displays in the skies above the village. Known as murmurations, these swarms begin with the onset of colder weather, when smaller flocks of starlings, which are often seen in the surrounding countryside, come together to form bigger groups. Toward the end of October and heading into November, the groups get ever larger. The phenomenon starts as daylight fades and flocks of a dozen to several hundred birds head towards the Gretna Green area. Some arrive from the nearby Solway Coast and farmlands while others travel over 20 miles.

A murmuration is an extraordinary sight. The gathering begins slowly and high in the sky as the individual flocks merge. Within half an hour, the sky darkens as hundreds of thousands of starlings arrive from all directions. At the start of the murmuration season

most of the birds are British but, as the cold weather hits other parts of northern Europe and Russia, they are joined by huge numbers of foreign visitors. It is estimated that, at the peak of the Gretna Green murmurations, there could be between one and two million birds in the sky.

As the sun drops over the horizon, the display begins. In a mesmerizing show of twisting, turning, swooping shapes, the flock goes one way and then another. Several groups break in different directions before turning and converging again at speed.

Watch the shapes and you see stars, dolphins, dragons and fish silhouetted against the sunset. As the minutes pass, the murmuration gets lower in the sky. There is little chatter from the birds, only the swish and flutter of over two million beating wings. This is an air show. It is nature's theatre.

As they drop towards their chosen roost site, the swarm spirals and condenses. Then it flows like black ink narrowing into a funnel. In minutes, the

sky empties and, from the trees and hedgerows, the noise starts; the amazing chatter of hundreds of thousands of birds. In the morning, small groups of starlings head off in different directions in search of food, only to gather again the following evening. Subject to weather, this pattern continues throughout November and December until the birds finally disperse around the turn of the year.

Scotland's cities. They were attracted by the warmth, the nesting sites that old buildings offered and easy food sources. Numbers were so high that they were regarded as a pest and some authorities introduced devices to scare the birds away. The tactics worked and the starlings left the cities but it seems they didn't simply relocate to the country.

Despite the massive murmurations that can be seen at places



Keith Morton, Species Policy Officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Scotland, explained why the starlings gather in such huge flocks. "Starlings are very temperature sensitive and they have to roost in big gangs. A few individuals will literally drop off their perches and die during the night because they did not get a good enough spot in the roost or did not manage to get enough food during the day."

Morton said that the discovery of the temperature-sensitivity issue is particularly interesting, "Starlings became extinct over almost the whole of mainland Scotland by about 1800. This is thought to have been a reaction to a sustained low temperature climate blip. Somewhat counter-intuitively, they survived in the Outer Hebrides and in Shetland and possibly in Orkney and bits of Caithness and Sutherland. Despite their high latitude, these areas are washed by the relatively warm Gulf Stream ocean current and retained a milder temperature. One result of all this was that the isolated surviving starlings evolved into a separate sub-species — or certainly a phenotypically different form, if not a full valid subspecies. These are referred to as Hebridean starlings and Shetland starlings. The Shetland ones are the most morphologically distinctive."

As mainland Scotland warmed in subsequent years, the few starlings that had survived were supplemented by an influx of birds from the south of the U.K. but it would still be another 150 years before starlings would fully recolonize Scotland.

In the 1950s and 60s, starlings were a common sight in

like Gretna, Morton notes that worryingly, starling numbers are falling. "Over the whole U.K., the long-term trend has been an 80 per cent decline between 1970 and 2010. The shorter term trend has been a 50 per cent decline between 1995 and 2010, so the rate of decline has increased."

The rate of decline in Scotland is slightly lower than the U.K. average, but is still a cause of concern. "Population trends for starlings make it a 'red list' species, i.e. of highest conservation concern, although it remains a common, widespread bird," Morton said.

The reason for the decline in numbers is not fully understood, but it is likely that loss of habitat through modern farming techniques plays a significant part, while previous generations of city-dwelling starlings were driven out as pests. It is sad that the numbers are falling, for the spectacle they provide is one of nature's truly magical moments.

As the season of the giant murmurations approaches, I think back to the runaway marriages and wonder how many love-struck couples were guided to Gretna Green, in fading light, by the starlings performing above this small Scottish village.

~ Words and Photos by Tom Langlands