

In Detail

One of the major recent influences in field identification has been the growing interest in identifying each individual bird not just to species, but also to age, sex, and subspecies if possible. This column is intended to address this fascinating new aspect of field identification.

Starling

MATT SANDERS

The visible distinctions between males and females of the Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* have been well described in the banding literature (e.g., Davis 1960, Parks 1962, Schwab and Marsh 1967). But the differences are not, to my knowledge, described in any current field guide, so most non-banding birdwatchers in North America seem unaware that the sexes of this common species can be distinguished in the field under favorable conditions.

Iris color: Although Starlings of both sexes have dark irises, almost all females over the age of six weeks have (and almost all males lack) a narrow yellowish or pale brownish ring on the outside edge of the iris. This is visible only at fairly close range (easily seen, for example, at window-sill feeding trays). Its presence or absence is not quite 100% reliable as an indicator of a Starling's sex: about 3% of the male starlings in one study (Davis 1959) also had the pale edging to the iris, and about 1% of females lacked it.

Bill color: The Starling's bill is darkish in winter, becoming yellow with the approach of the breeding season. During the breeding season, the base of the lower mandible is pale pink in females, blue to bluish-black in males. This mark is easy to see at a reasonable distance. One California study (Schwab and Marsh 1967) found bill color to be a reliable indicator of a Starling's sex in over 97% of all cases during the breeding season.

LITERATURE CITED:

- DAVIS, DAVID E., 1959. The sex and age structure of roosting starlings. *Ecology* 40:136-139.
- _____, 1960. Comments on the migration of starlings in eastern United States. *Bird-Banding* 31: 216-219.
- PARKS, G. HAPGOOD. 1962. A convenient method of sexing and aging the starling. *Bird-banding* 33: 148-151.
- SCHWAB, ROBERT G., AND REX E. MARSH. 1967. Reliability of external sex characteristics of the starling in California. *Bird-banding* 38: 143-147.