

Figure 1. Starlings floating in Burlington Canal. Photo: Marlene Hart



# Mysterious Deaths of European Starlings at Hamilton/Burlington

Marlene Hart

ON SATURDAY, 26 JANUARY 2013, a small group of outdoor enthusiasts from Guelph visited the Burlington Ship Canal (Burlington, Ontario) to do some bird photography. The group arrived at approximately 0940h and stayed for an hour. The conditions were sunny with a very light wind and temperature of  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The overnight temperatures for 22-25 January had ranged from  $-14^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-19^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

There were many Long-tailed Ducks (*Clangula hyemalis*) in the canal on the

west side of the Lift Bridge as well as other ducks; so at first, the group was engaged with admiring and photographing them. However, as I walked under the bridge and toward the lake, I noticed many small dark shapes floating in the water in the canal. After closer examination, it became clear that they were dead European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Our group leader, Gregg Parsons, and I estimated that there were at least 200 birds, and



Figure 2. Dead European Starlings.  
Photo: Marlene Hart

possibly more, floating on the south side of the canal in an uneven line stretching on either side of the bridge. No carcasses were noticed on land, on the dock, or any location other than the water in the canal. Several photos were taken of this phenomenon and all the while we were wondering what had caused the deaths. Unfortunately, no carcasses were retrieved. There were a number of immature Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*, Figure 4) and Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*, Figure 5) feeding on the starling carcasses.

The Burlington Skyway Bridge has long been known as a roosting location for starlings in the autumn and winter.



Figure 3. European Starling. Photo: Marlene Hart

A maximum of 70,000 birds was reported roosting there on 3 November 1991 by Bill Crins and Brian Henshaw (Curry 2006). During the recent Christmas Bird Count, approximately 700 starlings were reported leaving the roost on the morning of 26 December 2012 (N. Taylor and B. Smith, pers. comm.). There also appears to be an obvious reduction in the number of Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*) which roost at the bridge (M. Cadman, pers. comm.).



Figure 4. Great Black-backed Gull with European Starling carcass. *Photo: Marlene Hart*

Currently, there is a large maintenance project underway on the underside of the Skyway Bridge involving many tarps and much scaffolding. This work may help explain the current low numbers of starlings and pigeons at the bridge.

Several questions come to mind with this incident: What caused the deaths? Why were all the birds in the water? Where had they come from? Were the deaths pesticide-related; is Avitrol used to reduce the numbers of birds roosting on the bridge or to keep them away? Could the starlings have been electrocuted or killed during bridge maintenance? Or, did someone simply dump

the carcasses into the canal having obtained them from someplace else? As it was not possible to retrieve any of these birds for necropsy, we will probably never know the answers. Any pesticide-related cause may be a great concern because Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) often hunt pigeons, and perhaps starlings, from this bridge and they are very susceptible to some pesticides.

**Editors' note:** On the evening of 31 December 2010, near Beebe, Arkansas, approximately 3,000 Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) were killed when, apparently, they were flushed from their evening roost by a fireworks display.





Figure 5. Herring Gull with European Starling carcass. *Photo: Marlene Hart*

It was speculated that when flushed from their roost at night, under such circumstances, the birds were highly disoriented and flew into a nearby building; upon necropsy, their bodies were heavily bruised. Given the maintenance work going on under the Skyway Bridge (above), and possible flapping tarpaulins or other loud noises, the starlings there could also have been flushed inadvertently with numbers being killed as they flew into the Lift Bridge. See <http://www.jsonline.com/news/Wisconsin/113018024.html>.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Mike Cadman and Chip Weseloh for their assistance in preparing the latter part of this article i.e.: their research into the historical bird populations of the area and their proposals for various scenarios/causes of this phenomenon. I am also grateful to Gregg Parsons, leader of the photography group.

### **Literature Cited**

**Curry, R.** 2006. Birds of Hamilton and surrounding areas. Hamilton Naturalists' Club. Hamilton, Ontario.

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**Correction: Lumsden *et al.* (2012)**

In the paper, Lumsden, H., R. Kingdon, B. Kingdon, K. Intini and J. Kee. 2012. Recent history of Trumpeter Swans in Ontario and Quebec and their status in 2010-2011. *Ontario Birds* 30:109-119, published in the last issue of *Ontario Birds*, on page 118, in the left column, from lines 4-7, the sentence “On 27 June, a brood with four cygnets was found by Jeff Skevington on the Jock River west of Ashton (C. Lewis, pers. comm.)” should be changed to read “On 13 June, a brood with four cygnets was found by Michael and Joyce Jaques on the Jock River west of Ashton (see: Crins, W.J. 2011. The Nesting Season: June through July 2010 – Ontario Regional Report. *North American Birds* 64(4): 583-587).

**Correction: Weseloh and Hoar (2012)**

In the article by Weseloh, D.V.C. and T. Hoar. 2012. Spring movements of Great Egrets into Ontario: an eBird analysis. *Ontario Birds* 30(1):36-47 on p. 38, Figure 1, three breeding sites for Great Egrets in Ontario were not numbered. The sites are all in the western Lake Erie basin and, from east to west, should have been numbered as: 6. Middle Island, 7. East Sister Island and 8. Middle Sister Island. They are easily located on a topographical map or navigational chart of the area.