

## **Shakespeare's Starling**

**Narrator/Producer:** Zoë Comyns – New Normal Culture

**Broadcaster:** BBC Radio 4

**Narrator:** New York, 1890

**Joe Di Constanzo:** it is an oasis of green in this monstrous big city of New York.

**Narrator:** A man makes his way into central park.

**Joe Di Constanzo:** Well, actually back then it wasn't central. In the 1890s most of the city was south of here

**Narrator:** carrying a cage full of birds.

**Joe Di Constanzo:** It's on an important flyway of migrating birds. We heard blue jays a minute ago. Sounds like there might be a nut hatch off to our right.

**Narrator:** It's quiet.

**Joe Di Constanzo:** Central Park is quite famous as a birding location here in New York.

**Narrator:** There are no traffic lights yet in this great city.

**Joe Di Constanzo:** Oh, there's a red tailed hawk flying over, circling overhead.

**Narrator:** No fire engines, no neon lights on Broadway. It's before cars. Subways.

**Joe di Constanzo:** We're going into the Shakespeare Garden, the area which is next to the Shakespeare theatre.

**Narrator:** It's March, the snow on the ground and a clear winter sky. The birds glossy and speckled, starlings.

**Joe di Constanzo:** Take my advice. Get rid of it now before it's too late.

**Narrator:** The man, a pharmacist.

**Actor:** All studies here, I solidly defy

**Narrator:** A lover of Shakespeare

**Actor:** that I shall find him when he lies asleep.

**Narrator:** A lover of birds

**Actor:** In his ear, I'll holler.

**Joe di Constanzo:** The swirlies do. They can be good mimics.

**Joe di Constanzo:** They do have so many different sounds that they make noises, chirps, squeaks, squats,

**Narrator:** His name, Eugene Schieffelin and what he does next.

**Joe di Constanzo:** Don't do it.

**Narrator:** Will change the ecology of the USA for ever.

**Joe di Constanzo:** Don't do it Eugene. Please don't do it.

(02:07)

**Narrator:** Well that's how the story goes that Eugene Schieffelin loved Shakespeare so much he wanted to release all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare into America. In 1890 he released 60 starlings, 40 the following year, 100 starlings set free into Central Park. Each flew away and on this fabled flight carried with them a line from Shakespeare. Ornithologist Joe Di Constanzo works at the American Museum of Natural History.

**Joe di Constanzo:** Yeah. Within a year they were nesting on the roof of the American Museum of Natural History.

**Narrator:** We can see it from here from where we're sitting....

**Joe di Constanzo:** yeah... we can see it from where we're sitting. The museum tends not to advertise as part of its history.

**Narrator:** There's a certain irony to that.

(03:00)

Joe Di C: I don't think the museum would ever put a plaque up announcing that this is where the uh, starlings first nested.

**Narrator:** and they literally just took off

**Joe di Constanzo:** From there the starlings increased so very, very now from Mexico, Central America up into Canada and all across North America. They have been, uh, since their introduction a major pest in, in many areas,

**Archive:** A grim search in the shallows of Boston's Pleasant Park channel near Logan International Airport. The scene of a tragic crash by a turbo prop electric transport just after take off.

(03:32)

**Narrator:** This plane went down in 1960 killing 62 people and the cause, starlings.

**Archive:** Investigators are considering possible collision when a flock of migrating birds as a cause of the accident. Hundreds of dead starlings were found on the take-off runway.

**Narrator:** Even before this crash, people had come up with ways to deal with the starling population in the US which was getting out of hand, like eating them. There are recipes from the 1940s broiled starling on toast, starling stew and roast starling.

**Recipe:** Serve with mushroom soup. A dash of red wine won't hurt. Serve two starlings to a person. They go good with beer.

**Narrator:** In the forties Washington DC failed to get rid of the birds with balloons or artificial owls and mechanical hawks or even rubbing grease around starling feeding sites. Pest control even resorted to itching powder. Nothing worked.

**Laurel Zoet:** My name is Laurel Zoet. I own the Wild Birds Unlimited Nature shop in Brighton, Michigan.

**Narrator:** Laurels shop sells special feeders to bird hobbyists to outwit starlings.

**Laurel Zoet:** About a week ago outside the mall here we easily had a couple of hundred of them just hanging out on the power lines as the sun was going down.

**Narrator:** but the damage is more widespread than just the backyard.

**Laurel Zoet:** They cause a lot of damage to buildings with their roof sites because of the sheer quantity of droppings. Starlings cost \$800 million in agricultural damage every year here in the US and then there's them competing for nest cavities from our native songbirds.

Eugene was a product of his time. They just didn't see the aerial view, big picture, long-term ramifications.

(05:19)

**Paul Menzer:** Eugene Schieffelin was is a fascinating instance of the American attachment to Shakespeare in the late 19th century.

**Narrator:** Professor Paul Menzer, Mary Baldwin University,

**Paul Menzer:** and Schieffelin was a really interesting character, apparently a scion of a pretty wealthy and well-to-do and well-connected family. In the popular lore there is the idea that he took on himself the idea of introducing all the birds from Shakespeare into America. Now, there was an absolute obsession with Shakespeare in America, many, many reading clubs, improvement societies where the idea was the, the, the reading of Shakespeare was a great part of sort of cultural betterment and on and on.

(05:58)

**Narrator:** In fact, the first statue to a writer in Central Park where the starlings were released is not to an American, but to William Shakespeare. There is an irresistible side note here. This statute was put up by the famous Shakespearian actor Edwin Booth, whose brother another well-known actor, John Wilkes assassinated president Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

**James Shapiro:** John Wilkes Booth on the day of the assassination, he wrote a letter that he handed to another actor.

**Narrator:** This is Professor James Shapiro, Columbia University.

**James Shapiro:** In which he quoted Julius Caesar in justification of the assassination.

**Narrator:** But what does using Shakespeare allow the American people to express that they don't express without it?

**James Shapiro:** That's a, that's a great question. And I would say that there are things in a national experience which are difficult to grapple with, like the murder of a president or for that matter issues of race or immigration or the relationship between men and women. You know, this is the bread and butter of what Shakespeare's plays are about. And if you need a frame of reference, this is a ready frame, but the statue really in Central Park was the image of Shakespeare, claiming Shakespeare for America. So when you say that the, the release of the birds occurred in Central Park, it couldn't have occurred anywhere else. If you were symbolically choose a location that was meaningful to Shakespeare and America, that would have to be the location.

**Narrator:** (07:37) There aren't any records remaining that show Eugene Schieffelin infatuation with Shakespeare's birds, but he was involved in a greater effort to bring several species to America.

**Paul Menzer:** What we do know is that she even was part of the American Acclimatization society, which was about introducing some of the plant life and the animal life from Western Europe into the Americas.

**Harriet Ritvo:** The American Acclimatization Society was founded in 1871

**Narrator:** environmental historian, Harriet Ritvo.

**Harriet Ritvo:** Culturally, America was still in a kind of colonial mode even though of course it hadn't been a colony for a century at that point. There was a sense that what was European might be better. Um, and maybe nostalgia for the old country.

**Paul Menzer:** I think they had in mind the Central Park as a kind of ornithological menagerie, right? Where they would have all these various birds from Shakespeare sort of living in canonical harmony.

**Narrator:** and there are over 60 bird species mentioned in Shakespeare.

**Paul Menzer:** Yeah. It's hard to make it through a sonnet, or narrative poem or a play without running into some birds.

**Harriet Ritvo:** In a way, it's also an expression of the degree of human influence over the natural world. So it's a kind of eccentric version of an impulse that you see everywhere in the 19th century. Kind of reverse imperial impulse, take whatever was good in other places and introduce them back at home.

(09:02)

**Narrator:** in the same year as the American Acclimatization society is founded. 1871 a book is published called Birds of Shakespeare by James Edmund Harting. It was never easier to find all the references to birds in Shakespeare in one place. Hawks in Hamlet, owls and crows and Macbeth...

**Actor:** Light thickens and the crow makes wing to the rookie wood.

**Narrator:**...the Nightingale in King Lear or Romeo and Julies.

**Actor:** Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate tree,

**Narrator:** the Skylark in Cymbeline.

**Music:** Hark hark the lark...

**Narrator:** In fact, this society tried to introduce some of these birds along with others, like bullfinches and chaffinches. None were successful bar the starling. And also the sparrow mentioned in this song in Bottom's Dream from a Midsummer Night's Dream.

**Music:**...the finch, the sparrow and the lark, the plain song cuckoo grey, whose note for many a man doth mark and dares not answer nay, and dares not answer nay.

**Paul Menzer:** Birds come up again and again for Shakespeare to think about certain things, it allows them to think about omens and foreboding, um, and presages. And it also allows him to think about romantic or erotic relationships. Think about the extensive hawking image and taming of the shrew where Petruchio was talking about taming Kate, which has an obvious homonym with kite by as a, as a bird.

**Actor:** Another way I have to man my haggard to make her come, and know her keeper's call that is to watch her as we watch the kites that bait and beat and will not be obedient.

**Paul Menzer:** In particular, it goes on at some length after he has deprived her of food and sleep. And he's talking about Kate in terms of deprivation as a falconer would imagine a Goshawk or something in training where it's been hooded, where it's been deprived of food and where it's been tied to its master.

**Narrator:** Nowhere in America has earlier links to Shakespeare than Virginia, where the first

English settlers came in 1607. The journey was in part financed by those who also funded Shakespeare back in England.

**Ralph Alan Cohen:** The Jamestown expedition, the first settlement was sponsored by wealthy people, a sort of cooperation, several of whom went to the Blackfriars, some of whom lived in the Blackfriars area and they all loved theater.

**Narrator:** Ralph Alan Cohen is the director of the American Shakespeare Center in Stanton, Virginia. It testifies to America's continued passion for Shakespeare. Cohen has built a full size recreation of London's Blackfriars' playhouse, the only one in the world, and it's dedicated to the performance of Shakespeare.

**Narrator:** Well, I'm standing in a vast space and I feel like I've been transported back to the 1600s.

**Ralph Alan Cohen:** We worked very hard for that to be the case. Shakespeare, would recognize it. If Shakespeare walked in here he would say, what's the Blackfriars' doing in Virginia? This is as close a recreation as the best scholars could make it.

**Narrator:** The cast at the American Shakespeare Center are warming up for a performance of Henry IV Part 1. And if there is a twist in this tale or perhaps a stray feather in the train, it's that starlings are only mentioned once in Shakespeare, one single starling and it's in this play Henry IV Part 1, by the character Hotspur.

**KP Powell:** My name is KP Powell and, I play Hotspur in Henry IV Part 1.

**Narrator:** So I finally get to meet the person responsible for all these starlings?

**KP Powell:** Yes. I'm responsible, I hear that didn't go too well.

**Narrator:** That's an understatement. That did not go too well.

**Actuality from play:** Of you, my gentle cousin Westmoreland,. What yesternight our council did decree.

**Narrator:** So tell me about Henry IV Part 1. What's the plot?

**KP Powell:** The plot of Henry IV Part 1. Henry Bolingbrook is now, he is Henry IV. He is now on the throne. And uh, he made promises to many different factions who helped put him on the throne, the Percy Clan being one of them. And now he is starting to renege on those offers and starting to change where he wants to put his allegiance and his trust and the Percy Clan Hotspur especially is upset about that and they make a plot to take him out, to take him off the throne and put themselves there and the audience, they need to not know who's going to win. That's what makes it drama. That's what makes it exciting.

**Narrator:** So let's hear the line in which the infamous starving has mentioned.

**KP Powell:** He said he would not ransom Mortimer, forbad my tongue to speak of Mortimer, yet I shall find him when he lies asleep and in his ear I'll holler Mortimer nay I'll have a starling taught to speak nothing but Mortimer and give it him. I solemnly defy safe how to go and pitch this in great Bolingbrook and that same sword and buckler Prince of Wales, but that I think his father loves him not and would be glad he met with mischance. I would have him poisoned with a pot of a ale...

**Narrator:** ....and that's it, those lines

**KP Powell:** Out of all those lines. The one about a starling was to go, hmm, people need to know exactly what that bird looks and sounds like. I'm going to release it.

**Narrator:** So the idea is that you Hotspur will train a starling to say the king's enemies name over and over and over again.

**KP Powell:** You would drive you mad if you had a bird just sitting outside your window and all it could say was Mortimer or wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up. Mortimer. I think Shakespeare just knew that birds had the power to drive people mad.

**Narrator:** That's so mean.

**KP Powell:** Yeah. Yeah. War is mean.

Mortimer Mortimer. Mortimer. Mortimer. Yeah. I'll find him when he lies asleep and in his ear I'll holler Mortimer. Nay. I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but Mortimer and give it him. Oh and then Mortimer, Mortimer, Mortimer, Mortimer. Mortimer.....

(16:05)

**Paul Menzer:** The idea of being able to train a starling...

**Narrator:** Paul Menzer again,

**Paul Menzer:** ...maybe a fanciful image on Shakespeare's part..

**Narrator:** using the power of nature against humans.

**Paul Menzer:** Oh, that's is a fascinating idea. Hotspur's idea that you could enlist a bird and nature in your own political cause as part of their kind of northern rebellion. And there's something particularly mischievous about the idea with a starling. Um, it is the particular noise. It is the particular ability of the starling to mimic human speech that Hotspur is thinking about gets this whole phenomenon started of the starling in America . Ornithologists today will put their numbers up where the 200 million, but there's almost a starling for every American.

**Dan Rauch:** (16:49)

You might not have liked them, but they're, they're really pretty. They've got this really

beautiful bill and during the breeding season and it turns bright yellow. It's dark in the winter.

**Narrator:** Wildlife Biologist, Dan Rauch is from the Department of Energy and Environment in Washington, D C

**Dan Rauch:** But they've got this lustrous shine to them. They've got this metallic shine. They're dark with these little speckles all over them and when the sunlight hits them, they can be purple or blue or green.

**Laurel Zoet:** Starlings will congregate and fly in unison in a formation called a murmuration.

**Dan Rauch:** It looks like they're moving in concert, but they're actually moving in accordance to the way the bird next to them is moving.

**Laurel Zoet:** The way they do it is how humans play a game of telephone. When we sit in a circle and whisper information in each other's ears, a lot of times the information gets lost or the message gets messed up, but starlings are able to do a game, quote unquote telephone with seven of their neighbours and not lose information. And that helps them sink and fly in fluid motion, as one large mass.

**Dan Rauch:** So it's almost like a swirling globe or sometimes it will stretch out into different forms and shapes. So it's almost like a moving dark cloud.

18:17

**Laurel Zoet:** It would be like a large vat of water. Let's say the sky is a large vat of water.

**Dan Rauch:** It's always in motion, always taken a different shape and it's really mesmerizing to watch.

**Laurel Zoet:** And someone dropped in some India ink dye and as the ink starts to kind of spread through the water, you can still see the ink because stays together. But at the same time it's flowing into the water.

**Dan Rauch:** Can you see him through the trees? He's got like a speckled breast up there. Nice dipping down and he's got somebody, um, he's chewing on something up there.

**Laurel Zoet:** Part of that is the safety in numbers. A lot of times when you see a murmuration, it might be a bird of prey in the area that they've spotted.

**Dan Rauch:** A Merlin. So Merlin is a midsize falcon. It's one of the three falcons we have in Washington, D c. These guys are only here in the winter and there's superb hunters and it's got something in which it was chewing on a little bit and now it's doing some preening. And uh, after he finishes this meal, look for another before it migrates back up north. So it's going to fatten up and hopefully it'll fatten up on some starlings.

**Narrator:** And just as we're standing here more and more keep arriving.



**Dan Rauch:** It's the, it's the, it's the morning buffet. Uh, there comes some more in, um, we've seen a few other species go over, but..

**Narrator:** Totally outnumbered by the starting.

**Dan Rauch:** ...totally out-numbered by the starlings, like five to one. They forage in the same area. They're going for the same food source. So here you have eight or so starlings, 9, 10 coming in.

**Dan Rauch:** (19:54) So this is a nice big American elm tree, which has got a nest hole in it. The starlings have moved in. Um, looks like they came inside to check it out to see if it was a good nesting spot. Um, one was inside the other one brought some food in there, picking up straw and hay and grass. And they are building a nest. And so it only takes 10 or 14 days. They eggs will hatch...

**Narrator:** Ready for the next generation.

**Dan Rauch:** More starlings for everyone. And this will probably be their first group, another five weeks. They'll do it again and then they'll do it again. So we'll have plenty of starlings for generations to come.

**Paul Menzer:** Around the mid 1590s Shakespeare picks for a coat of arms and his father's name. And one of the things that stands on his coat of arms is a, is a falcon. And this falcon is engaged in that called shaking, which is when the falcon has been taken out of its tresses, uh, and, and hooded and shakes its feathers out. And of course it is obvious puns upon the name shake that I think we're picking up on here. We can think about the falcons and the hawks that might stand as a registrar or an index to Shakespeare's own ambitions and aspirations, which are a tricky thing to try to think about. There's one image of Shakespeare that we love of him as a, as a commoner, um, as a school boy from Stratford. But in arriving at London clearly fell into some circles that awakened some sort of sense of aspiration in him. And in terms of birds, we might think of course about the first bird imagery that gets associated with Shakespeare's, the upstart crow that Robert Green calls him in the early 1590s on the front end of his career, the upstart crow. But then by the mid 1590s, he's thinking in terms of falcons. By the end of his career, the Sweet Swan of Avon, you can see the trajectory of Shakespeare moving from being an unfledged writer to a fully plumed Swan. So we can trace the entire trajectory of his emergence through bird imagery.

(22:03)

**Narrator:** Laurel Zoet knows starlings have caused havoc across America.

**Laurel Zoet:** So we're going to cut through the garage..

**Narrator:** and to educate people about this she keeps one as a pet, called Pip and like Shakespeare's starling in Henry IV Part 1, Pip can talk.

**Laurel Zoet:** Oh hello.

**Narrator:** Hello Pip – he’s delighted to see you.

**Laurel Zoet:** We are outside behind my 1890 farmhouse. Um, my aviary trying to get my starling to say William Shakespeare-bird cause he's been trained to mimic that.

**Narrator:** He probably won't say anything now I'm here.

**Laurel Zoet:** I might step in with him and see if he'd given this to my hand if he'd be a little more comfortable. Say William Shakespeare, who’s a mimic? 1890s.

**Pip:** 80s

**Laurel Zoet:** Yes. 1890s we liked that one. It's a new one. We're working on 1890s cause that was their introduction.

**Pip:** Good morning, good morning, good morning.

**Narrator:** and good morning to you Pip.

**Laurel Zoet:** he seems rather fixated good morning at this late state in the day.

(23:13)

**KP Powell:** Who knows what like what small butterfly effect change that's had on America by that bird being here. But we can't go back now. So I just, I hope that at least like three people in his life went, oh, I know what a starling is, and saw the play and go, oh, I get that will better understand this one line in Shakespeare's play.

**James Shapiro:** What this is about as much as the starling's are about, is a desire to carry Shakespeare and plant him in America with the birds it’s planting him our trees. But it all speaks to the same desire to claim Shakespeare for America. \

**Paul Menzer:** So if, if we use Eugene Schieffelin release of the starling as an image for the ways that Shakespeare has now infiltrated America, and if we think about what Schieffelin did, uh, figuratively, rather than literally, I think what he did is help popularize Shakespeare in America to the extent that today our life is absolutely suffused with it, in positive ways, not as an invasive species, but as a welcome one. Um, and I wouldn't put it past any late 19th century wealthy American to have done something exactly this bananas.

(24:27)

**Laurel Zoet:** Shakespeare Bird, European starling,

**Pip:** European....

**Narrator:** Oh, there he goes.

**Pip:** Central Park, New York City.

**Laurel Zoet:** Central Park, New York City.

**Pip:** Shakespeare. Shakespeare bird, Shakespeare bird. Shakespeare bird. Shakespeare bird. Shakespeare bird. European Starling.

**Laurel Zoet:** Central Park.

**Pip:** Central Park, New York City.

**Narrator:** He has so many words.

**Laurel Zoet:** I think it makes for a pretty powerful memory that when you see a bird actually say distinctive phrases or European starling or say its name, that sticks with you. And so yeah, to help people remember exactly how they came here.

**Narrator:** Will you teach him to say Eugene Schieffelin.

**Laurel Zoet:** I think his vocabulary might be maxed out. I was on the fence when he was little about teaching him how to say invasive junk bird, but I changed my mind.

**Narrator:** That might shake his confidence.

**Laurel Zoet:** Right. Exactly.

**Pip:** Good morning. Shakespeare bird.

(25:34)

**Narrator:** Eugene Schieffelin died in 1906 age 80 blissfully unaware of the impact of releasing the starlings. But what about Hotspur from Henry IV Part 1, his fate?

**KP Powell:** Hotspurs no more, Hotspur is out of the picture because, he gets killed. I'll see you on the other side.

**Narrator:** And Hotspur, in his final scene, he actually dies mid-sentence talking to himself saying he's dust and food for, well, Prince Hal finishes this sentence for him saying, Hotspur is food for...

**KP Powell:** ...food for words, but he says he'll be food for worms and you're done..

**Narrator:** and I wonder what will then eat the worms?

**KP Powell:** If you're in the right area, he'll be picked up by starlings at the whole cycle continues again. This is my end.

**Pip:** Good morning.

(26:29)

**Narrator:** What are you feeding him?

**Laurel Zoet:** Some dried mealworms.

**Pip:** Mealworm...mealworm

**Laurel Zoet:** Why do I feel like he just said mealworm?

**Pip:** Mealworm

**Narrator:** I think he did say mealworm. I was wondering what that was.

**Laurel Zoet:** Right now he's going between his main perch and his evening roost, so that tells me he's ready to settle in for the night.

**Narrator:** Goodbye pip. Thank you much.

**Laurel Zoet:** Yeah. I would say good night where he would probably just answer Good Morning.

**Pip:** Into bath water. Into bath water. European Starling. Central Park. New York City. Shakespeare. Shakespeare bird, Shakespeare bird, Shakespeare bird. Good morning, good morning. Good morning, good morning. European Starling.