



Encyclopedia of Life

[eol.org](http://eol.org)

## Starlings

*Sturnus vulgaris*

In this podcast we hear a story in two acts about a very familiar bird—the common starling. It's a non-native species that is omnivorous, gregarious, adaptable, and highly successful in its adopted land. It turns out we humans have inadvertently put out the welcome mat for this alien species. Act One tells the story about this winged invader with an \$800 million appetite for fruit crops. As for Act Two, we'll let independent producer Josh Kurz and the theater troupe Higher Mammals explain.

### Transcript

**Ari:** From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Usually, when we think of invasive species, we don't think of this: *Sturnus vulgaris*, or the European starling, is originally thought to be from Europe. Today it's also found throughout the US, and the US Department of Agriculture considers it one of the most successful invasive species.

**Cabe:** The main agricultural damage are to fruit crops, they love red berry-like fruits like they can be murder on cherry trees and cherry crops and also mulberries.

**Ari:** That's Paul Cabe, a biologist at Washington and Lee University in Virginia. Each year, the USDA says starlings eat their way through roughly 800 million dollars worth of crops. And that's not all.

**Cabe:** ...they'll eat the food that is put out for the cows and then defecate in the food that's left and they're very good at picking out the highest caloric part of the food that's put out for the cows which is the most expensive...and leaving the rest with their feces for the cows.

**Ari:** Starling feces can cause a kind of lung infection in humans called histoplasmosis.

And it turns out that the starlings' domination of the US would not have been possible without the help of another species.

Humans.

In the last 200 years, vast stretches of the US have been changed into farmland, which makes for perfect starling habitat...since farmland looks like the European grasslands where it's thought starlings first evolved. The birds also like to dwell in cavities. So houses and barns with roofs and eaves are ideal places for them to nest.

**Cabe:** So it's like we've built millions and millions of nesting boxes for them.

**Ari:** But it turns out this is the SECOND act of the starling story. For act 1 -- the beginnings of the European starling in the US -- we turn to independent producer Josh Kurz.

**Brother:** There he is! Defender of the Sparrow, the chaffinch, and the thrush! My brother, EUGENE SCHIEFFELIN!

**Josh:** Eugene Schieffelin was the man who started it all. He's also the protagonist of *Here Comes the Starling*, a stage play commissioned by EOL and performed by the theatrical troupe, Higher Mammals, in dubious honor of Schieffelin. And though the dialogue's imagined, the facts have been confirmed.

**Schieffelin:** All I want is some aspirin and you mock me. You have always had little appreciation for the natural world or my work...

**Brother:** Ha! To call it work, one has to make money with it or at least sustain a living. As you do neither, I would be generous to categorize your endeavors anything but 'subsidized flights of fancy! How do you intend to pay for your aspirin?

**Josh:** The play is set in New York during the second half of the 1800s and it embellishes on what little is known about Eugene himself. The Schieffelins were a very wealthy family who amassed their fortune through a lucrative pharmaceutical business. Among several brothers, Eugene Schieffelin was the only one not involved in the family business. He was an amateur naturalist, and he joined numerous societies including New York's Zoological Society and Genealogical and Biographical Society. In the play, he's portrayed as a kind of wannabe scholar.

**Schieffelin:** How's this? 'To the Editors of the Evening Post: As one of those who had something to do with the introduction of the sparrow into this country I feel compelled to take up my pen in their defense given the determined crusade against them.'

**Mrs. Schieffelin:** You sound like a pretentious loon...

**Josh:** Schieffelin only wrote one article to the Post. But the sparrow would not be the bird that made him famous. Schieffelin founded his own society, which was instrumental in transplanting the bird that would.

**Schieffelin:** Gentlemen!, I'm pleased to announce to all members of our American Acclimatization Society that I have secured for import a good number of Starlings for purposes of introduction!

**Crowd:** Here here! <clinking of glasses>

**Ari:** Can I interject for a sec, Josh?

**Josh:** Sure, Ari. Go ahead.

**Ari:** Let's not forget to remind everybody that acclimatization societies weren't uncommon in those days. They were usually started by people who were living in a foreign land themselves. Their goal was to bring the animals they'd grown up with back home to the new places where they were living. This was before the USDA.

**Cabe:** It would be illegal now, it would be illegal now of course.

**Ari:** That's Paul Cabe again.

**Cabe:** There's some contention about the actual details but the most consistent details that I have found were that they were released...in two batches in central park in NYC...The story goes...Schieffelin was trying to introduce all the birds from Shakespeare into north America.

**Josh:** Whether or not Shakespeare was behind Schieffelin's motivation is unclear. The play Here Comes the Starling makes reference to Shakespeare only once, possibly a nod to the single mention of a Starling in all of Shakespeare's plays.

**Schieffelin:** April 25, 1891. The second, and last group of Starlings has been released. I feel as though New York has become a richer place because of them. We cannot all be William Shakespeare, but I can only hope that our efforts will be remembered someday.

**Mrs. Schieffelin:** Who are you talking to?

**Josh:** Eugene Schieffelin didn't leave behind any journals or letters, so the play fills in some of these narrative gaps with...speculation. But if he were alive today, Scieffelin could proudly (or maybe not-so-proudly) say mission accomplished!

**Ari:** Thanks, Josh.

**Josh:** Sure thing, Ari.

**Ari:** That was independent producer Josh Kurz, with excerpts from the play *Here Comes the Starling* by Higher Mammals. Visit [eol.org](http://eol.org) to see a poster of the performance. But don't expect to find a script for the whole play.

Our series, *One Species at a Time*, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

## Meet the Scientist

Meet Paul Cabe, the scientist featured in the *Starlings* Podcast:



### ***Where do you work?***

Department of Biology, Washington & Lee University.

### ***What do you study?***

I'm interested in gene flow and the genetic diversity and structure of wild populations and communities.

### ***What are three titles you would give yourself?***

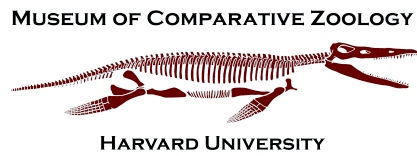
Biologist, Environmentalist, Father.

### ***What do you like to do when you are not working?***

I think about food and cooking a lot, and spend a good deal of time in my kitchen. I recently bought a used violin to play around with (a big, big leap out of my comfort zone). And I read a lot (mostly novels).

***What do you like most about science?***

I think I just love the diversity of life, and pursuing my own interests to better understand little pieces of it.



The One Species at a Time podcast series is supported by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.