

# HOLES IN YOUR HOUSE, WINDOW REFLECTIONS, AND THE HORMONES OF SPRING

## 1) Wake-up Call: Window Reflections

Birds make two different attempts to join us through closed windows. One is the big **BAM!** of the body of the pursued (usually a grouse, or ex-grouse) and/or occasionally the pursuer itself, who doesn't stop in time either—a hawk or owl, or very rarely, a Northern Shrike. (see *Window Collisions* column.)

Then there is the early-morning **bam-bam-bam** of an ardent, brightly-coloured male who is trying with all his testosterone to drive away a rival in the window because he is going to nest nearby.

*Tap, tap, tap, wback* and you jerk awake; its hardly dawn yet, but a bird's day starts very early. The mated pair have chosen a



nesting-site, and your house is in it. Robins and cardinals are most commonly cited

because of their bright breast colour, though once we had a Chipping Sparrow, agitated by the sight of his own bright brown cap, who ran back and forth along our window-sill. It's spring; it's male (occasionally, female); the strong hue reflected in the glass is a taunting, threatening rival who won't go away. Worse, this rival behaves abnormally and cannot be driven off by the usual tactics of the poor bird who is trying to defend his chosen nesting property. The bird repeatedly attacks the reflection you cannot see (unless you are on a high ladder or have wings) but rarely injures himself, though I did once have a report of a bird leaving blood on the window. It is possible that he first hit the glass really hard while fleeing from a potential predator, and later commenced or resumed his attempts to banish his rival while still bleeding from his beak from the earlier crash.

Thankfully, once the babies hatch, both robin and cardinal males help feed the young, and so become much too busy to spend time at the window-rival.

If you can't stand the banging until courtship season is over, try temporarily covering the *outside* of the window with, say, opaque plastic sheeting, or a spray-on such as Christmas "snow," glitter, or even starch. It will wash off later. Sometimes, though, the bird discovers the rival in *another* window. For unreachable windows, would a light shining out disrupt the reflection? Do tell me if it works.

Be patient; think of it as passion, and be glad it isn't a lovesick Great Blue Heron.



**One of a pair of Turkey Vultures on balcony outside the window that reflected the unnatural stranger. Isn't he/she a beauty? I'm not being sarcastic; I've had many vulture patients and have always found them attractive creatures.**  
*Photo courtesy Mrs S.Hanson*

*Last-minute Note.* A recent lady caller returned from the South in mid-April to find her top-story window-frames much damaged by the persistent attentions of a pair of Turkey Vultures! The house is on a rocky cliff over the St. Lawrence, and I suspect the vultures were nesting on the cliff nearby and trying to drive away the rude rival in the window. Not only that, but the pair even peered down through a skylight searching for him!

Luckily, this state of affairs only lasted another 10 days after they got back, and presumably the vultures settled down to peaceful housekeeping and forgot about the ghost-vulture in her bedroom.

### ***Holes in Your House: # 1) Chimney Stories, On and In***

For birds, spring is charged with the hormones to mate and nest. Successful courtship often depends on the acquisition of prime real-estate, which centres around a suitable nesting site. Many birds nest in a hole. A chimney provides a hole...

Here is the list of the species we have encountered that slid unwillingly down the sooty inside of chimneys:

- American Kestrel
- Chimney Swift
- Common Merganser
- Eastern Screech Owl
- European Starling
- House Sparrow
- Rock Dove (a.k.a. pigeon)
- Wood Duck
- Yellow-shafted Flicker

A Bluebird (*pers.comm. Sue Meech, Sandy Pines Wildlife Centre, Napanee. See Mandate*)

Other sooty chimney inspectors have included bats, squirrels and raccoons.

At first glance these varied species look as if they have little in common. But they do have one trait they share: ***they all nest in holes.*** They all like to roost in holes, too, and many species need both. You might say that pigeons and kestrels don't, but whenever they can, though, they prefer an actual hole that leads into a darkened, safe space. When pigeons nest on window-sills and so on, it is because of a shortage of their preferred housing. In fact, all these hole-nesters have a severe shortage of their natural nesting-sites that gets worse as we chop down dead trees and bulldoze cliffs. They are looking for that dark hollow in a branch or stub, an inviting hole in a dead tree, a safe cavity in a rocky ledge. Thanks to our rearrangement of land and property to suit human needs, there are fewer natural cavities—and more chimneys. All chimneys present a dark hole that invites investigation.

### *Some case histories:*

#### *Screech Owl, January.*

Owls tend to nest very early and so get the best nesting-sites before the migrators come back from the South, and Screech Owls live in Ontario year-round and are expert at spotting crevices in cottages, chimneys, barns—and also expert at getting in.

Luckily, this fireplace had no blaze in it, and the little owl had been in the cold chimney for at least 2 days (the owners could hear it scrambling about until it tumbled into the fireplace). The little owl was in fine condition except for a lot of soot in the eyes, which had inflamed nictitating membranes. We cleaned out most of it with a damp Q-tip, put in eyedrops (we often just use the Natural Tears type of solution or one meant for contact lenses) and repeated the procedure 48 hours later. After a few days of captivity however, the owl decided he had had enough of it and escaped from his unit (inside our clinic) at night. Screech Owls are very good at this!

Next morning when I went into the clinic, his door was slightly ajar. No owl, but he had to be in the building somewhere. I hunted all over for him. It seems that he had had a fine adventure swooping about the place, knocking over most of the medicines on the counter, his 190g weight breaking the neck of my suspended Great Blue Heron skeleton when he landed on it. He also had been doing a log-rolling act on the paper-towel holder, sending a swirl of paper towels into the sink. I finally found him sitting slit-eyed on top of the X-ray machine, watching me as I searched for him. How exasperating!

Screech Owls depend on their camouflage for safety from predators, and they blend in with nearly anything extremely well. They close their eyes to mere slits, concealing their big yellow irises, yet they are still able to watch for prey or predator. I can't remember how often I have "lost" a Screech Owl, whether gray or red phase, indoors or outdoors; especially in an outdoor aviary with trees and bushes, as above. As his eyes were clean and he had gained 40g in a week, I banded and released him back at his home site. He/she most likely had a mate to look after.



**Red-phase Screech Owl: Find me**

#### *Common Merganser, June 9<sup>th</sup>.*

Arrived suddenly inside the unlit fireplace of surprised family. Very strong, very irritated and hissing loudly. Captured in a blanket and bundled into the car to be checked by me, but one of the children couldn't resist a teeny peek as they were setting off and the prisoner charged out, rampaging around the inside of the car. Consternation—doors hurriedly hurled open—duck flew strongly away, probably swearing vigorously in duck-language.

This is a *big* fish-eater, weighing as much as a Great Horned Owl. Those folk need a chimney cap! (And some upholstery cleaner.)

Common Mergansers usually nest in a hollow in a tree, bank, cliff, or even a rock pile. From above, a chimney is a rock pile with a hollow in it.

#### *Raccoons nesting in your chimney*

Luckily I have never had this disruptive experience but many people have, especially in cities. I have been told that leaving a bright light shining up the chimney and/or having a loud talk-radio also in the chimney will shoo them off. (A loud talk-station would shoo me off, too.) If removal has to be done, remember that there are likely to be kits in there even later in the year.

## *ON a chimney*

One occurrence was reported to us. On one of the many islands in the St. Lawrence River is a summer house with a large stone chimney which looked like a perfect base on which a pair of Ospreys decided to build. Some neighbours told the house-owners that the debris falling onto their patio was dangerous—bacteria-spreading and so on (it was soon after the anthrax scare in the U.S.) and that they ought to destroy the nest at once. They called me, uncertain. Horsefeathers, I said. You're not going to use the chimney in July-August? Then appreciate this unusual opportunity; observe and photograph the whole thing. What luck for you! As for the debris, just sweep it up. Since when are twigs and a bit of reconstituted fish considered disease-producing?

The house-holders liked my approach, and from what I read in their later letters and saw in their photographs that they sent, it made an exciting summer for them.

## *# 2) Vents—bathroom and dryers*

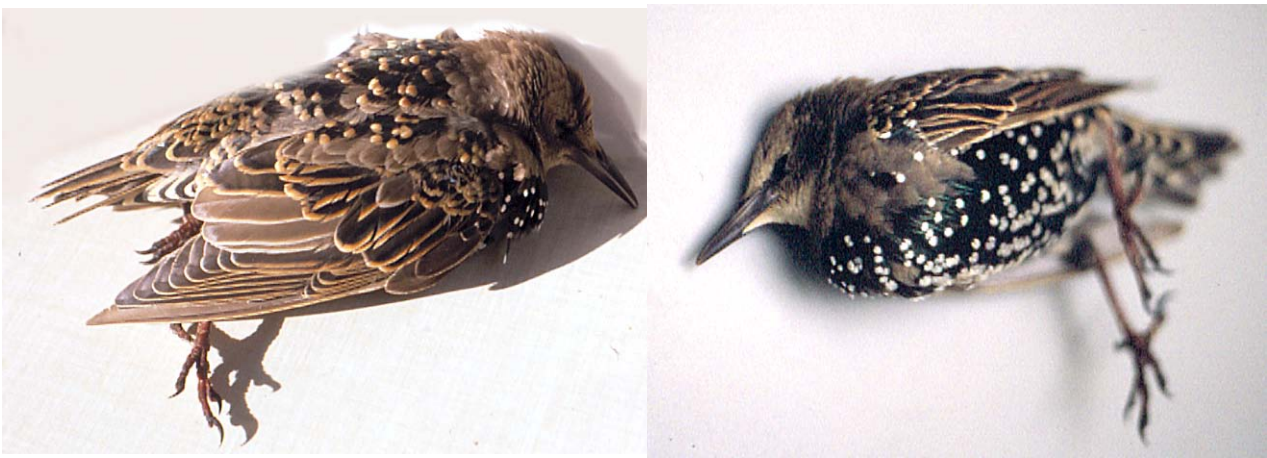
In VENT ive Birds (sorry, I couldn't help myself)

Starlings are natural cavity-nesters, and our destruction of their habitat has reduced the number of natural "houses" in hollow branches and rocky walls. However, they have adapted to the change, for which we should respect them: adaptation is crucial to the survival of each species. We've had a number of calls about starlings nesting in dryer and bathroom vents. A householder described how a determined pair had learned to open the lid of a wall-vent. This takes a certain ingenuity! The birds had to discover that the closed lid would pop open periodically upon a gust of outgoing air, and then they had to pry open the lid themselves.

All of our callers wanted to keep each starling family together, but out of the vent. We suggested transferring the nestlings and some of the nesting-material into a temporary small cardboard box, say a shoe-box with a hole in it, taped to the wall nearby. Their reports said it worked; the parents heard their young in the box and switched homes without a pause.

Starlings are not seed-eaters; their slender, pointed beaks are quite soft and are designed for picking up insects. They hunt bugs using a most unusual beak movement. As they walk along the ground in a short-grass area (like your lawn) and encountering a leaf or a bit of bark that might conceal a juicy insect, they push their closed beak under it and then flick their beak wide open, flipping the object aside. That is how the nesting pairs open the vent-lids.

To prevent such nesting, try enclosing the outlet with hardware cloth. Like chimneys, all inlets



**Dead European Starling, April. Two views of winter plumage. The spots on the tips of the green iridescent plumage literally wear off the breeding birds in spring, and the beak turns yellow**

and outlets need to be “caged.”

What amounts to a racial prejudice has been levelled at the starling for a long time (“foreigners,” “non-natives,” “aliens”) particularly regarding their use of nest-boxes. Yes, they are hole-nesters and the pretty bluebird is a hole-nester too, who may lose the argument over spring real-estate. However it is easy to satisfy the bluebird’s needs by building houses for them, and they are not in decline. Could it be that our reasoning is affected by our love of colour? What would happen if the starling and bluebird exchanged plumage?

Starlings are not “blackbirds” but are the only wild representative in North America of a separate family.\* Curiously, people seem to admire and even spend large amounts of money buying their imported, caged closest cousin, the Minah Bird. Both minahs and starlings are very good mimics. Just listen to March “meadowlarks” and “Red-tailed Hawks” and other migrants which often turn out to be the starling singing songs he heard down South.

*Recent Note.* How about this! A man was puzzled by the calls of a goose in his barn, where no goose should be; after some investigation the owner of the voice was captured and released outside. It was a spring starling (*pers. comm. Sue Meech, Sandy Pines Wildlife Centre, Napanee.*)

Incidentally, the plumage of starlings is quite unusual in structure, and surprisingly attractive on close-up. See *photographs*.

### **# 3) Eaves and holes into the attic or dead-air -space**

Little cavities in eaves, especially in older houses, are invitations to kestrels, starlings and House Sparrows. If one of these becomes bothersome, remember that the breeding cycle is complete in about four weeks and then a handiman, handy-husband or wildlife “rescue” person can be called to check that there are no birds left inside before closing the hole.

*Kit Chubb*

\* The century-old, traditional taxonomy classification system we are familiar with is based on morphology--comparing anatomical features to develop a scheme of relations. The newest studies are biochemical using DNA, have shown astonishing detailed picture of ancestral relations of birds very different from that of traditional classification. Here, for example, in the Order Passeriformes, there is a Parvorder Passerida, then a Superfamily Muscicapoidea, which shows that the following birds are closely related: **waxwings, dippers, thrushes (including the bluebird) nuthatches and starlings.** To see more about these DNA/DNA hybrid studies, one excellent textbook that I found is *The Manual of Ornithology; Avian Structure and Function, by Noble S. Proctor and Patrick J. Lynch. ISBN 0-300-05746-6, pub. by Yale University, USA.*