

Starling hunt in snow

Written by By James H. Phillips
Thursday, 26 January 2012 11:16 -



Winter's fury is a hostile visitor. High winds, blowing snow and sub-freezing temperatures bring hope to ice fishermen, but the rest of us hunker down in our warm homes to await a storm's passing.

Three-day snow storms are common at this time of year, so predictable you might think we would plan ahead. We never know the precise date of their arrival, only that they will occur. But I have I have never known an outdoorsman to make meaningful preparations.

After shoveling the sidewalk and driveway, most of us find ourselves with time on our hands. We have no desire to go outside and battle the raging elements. We remain indoors and watch television. Boredom gnaws at our state-of-mind. We become restless.

Invariably, I find myself feeding birds, tossing slices of bread or birdseed on a snow-blanketed backyard, believing our feathered creatures are having a difficult time combating the elements. I watch as flocks of starlings and English sparrows, along with a smattering of other species like the occasional cardinal, descend quickly to consume the free food.

A fly-fishing friend said he ties flies when snow-storms keep him indoors. He finds he can tie no more than six flies of one pattern at a sitting. "If I tie a dozen," he explained, "I get bored and quit."

He makes his time more productive by tying six of this, six of that, then six of something else

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and so on. It is not an efficient way to tie flies, but it keeps him at his tying bench for long stretches. I do not get the urge to tie flies until early spring when the approaching trout season nears.

Years ago the idea came to me that I might acquire a few starling skins for fly-tying by picking off the birds with a BB gun during the winter months, the time when their plumage is prime. Starling feathers are a glossy black with a green or purple sheen. They also feature small, white spots. They are used in a number of trout fly patterns, especially those of British origin.

Starlings, I hasten to add, are not protected by law. They are viewed as a nonnative, invasive pest. They are found in North America because in the 1890s ago a man in New York released from 60-100 starlings in Central Park. He wanted to establish populations of every bird species mentioned in Shakespeare's works. This goal is rather odd, if you ask me. You probably think the same way. But who are we to condemn others for crackpot ideas?

Shakespeare was English, so the various bird species had to be imported from England. The released starlings instantly found an ideal environment, and quickly multiplied to the point they have become pests. There are an estimated 200 million starlings today in the United States.

I came up with my starling brainstorm years ago in late summer while painting and repairing my duck decoys. I quickly carved and painted a couple of wooden starlings, which I planned to set out next to slices of bread, hoping the decoys would quickly entice within BB gun range their wild brethren.

While I was at it, I made a couple of English sparrow decoys. The small sparrows, I thought, would provide a little action while waiting for the larger starlings. English sparrows also are classified as a pest.

I had high hopes for this style of hunting, especially during a winter storm when I would be cooped up indoors. Hunting is hunting, no matter the species. This was eloquently articulated by a famous Native American who years ago said, "When the buffalo are gone, we will hunt mice."

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A starling may not be a mallard and an English sparrow may not be a green-winged teal, but the concept is the identical.

Alas, the idea didn't work. The birds — both starlings and English sparrows — paid no heed to my decoys. More birds came to the backyard after I removed the decoys.

I also tried my sparrow decoys in mid-summer when various sparrows and finches regularly came to my bird-feeder. (I wasn't hunting during this experiment. I was investigating bird behavior.) The decoys didn't attract any wild sparrows at that time, either.

The only reason I can think of is that the birds on approach often sit on a nearby utility wire or tree limb for a considerable length of time before landing on the ground. As they observe the scene they notice the decoys are not moving and this alerts them to danger.

(Mourning doves are similar in habit, but observe feeding fields from a far greater distance. They often approach decoys.)

My explanation may be wrong, but it is the only reason I can think of.

The way to hunt starlings is to toss out some bread and wait until the birds appear. This can take a few minutes or a few hours. After they appear, quietly open your backdoor a crack — just enough to allow you to poke out the muzzle of your BB gun. Take aim and squeeze the trigger.

Starlings are notoriously tough birds. A kid's BB gun has too little power to kill most starlings. A struck bird will instantly fly off, as will the rest of the flock. You need a souped-up pellet gun to anchor these pests.

Anyway, that's how I spent my idle time during the most recent winter storm. I stayed indoors to think about starlings while trying to decide if I should set up my fly tying vise, perhaps tying a few starling and peacock trout patterns.

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