

Perquisitions

The first volume in a series of three publications documenting the investigative excursions of Professor William Starling and his research team. This volume contains descriptions of the various participants' thoughts on the expedition and its rationale.

Perquisitions

being the first volume of investigations, observations and musings collected on the

Thetford • London • Oxford

expedition led by
Professor William Starling of DodoLab
accompanied by

Leila Armstrong, Lisa Hirner, Andrew Hunter, Giles Lane, Josie Mills & Hazem Taguri

This set of publications contains three volumes. This first volume, *Perquisitions*, is offered as a brief explanation of the nature and rationale of the *Thetford-London-Oxford* expedition. I have invited my travelling companions to describe their interests and intentions here because, while they were accompanying me on my research, they also had distinct ideas they wished to pursue. Book 2,

behaviour; probing the ground for food, chattering in the branches of regal trees and joining in the elegant choreography of dark murmurations. Sadly, my encounters with my species were minimal and fleeting, limited to the occasional spotting of a single bird and the lone encounter with a tiny flock of no more than thirty specimens clustered together above the gardens at Thetford's King's House, these seeming to frantically trace out an undulating form, trying to map out in the sky the silhouette of a much larger flock which had been previously described by the locals. I was informed that the weeks prior to my visit had been unseasonably cold and a number of locals were convinced that this may have triggered the departure of starlings from the area as flocks had been witnessed in advance of the frigid weather. While I am sceptical of this theory (weather is not normally a trigger of migration for our kind), I remain somewhat naive in these matters as long seasonal migrations are not a behaviour we in North America have widely engaged in.

Congeries, provides a collection of items and ideas accumulated on our travels. These are presented simply as an itemised collection of things of interest to us. The final book, *Speculations*, provides the reader with our individual and collective thoughts on what is offered in *Congeries*, with myself and my learned colleagues reflecting (through text and images) on the significance and meaning of what we saw and heard. It is here that I offer my thoughts on the various theories offered concerning the disappearance of *Sturnus Vulgaris*.

I began my journey at a largely forgotten rural church, an impressive stone structure with a Norman doorway situated on the edge of ploughed fields, adjacent to a naturally wooded area clustered around a cool stream. The ancient church, with its diminishing flock of parishioners, seemed an appropriate site to begin this journey of inquiry and loss. It is my hope that my many avian cousins (crows, rooks, ravens, magpies) who still populated that area are a sign that there is still hope for *Sturnus Vulgaris* but, sadly, I fear I left England thinking of those rare sightings of single starlings and the opening line of that old English rhyme echoing in my mind.

One for Sorrow...

Professor William Starling



Professor Starling's Thetford-
London-Oxford Expedition
Book 1: Perquisitions

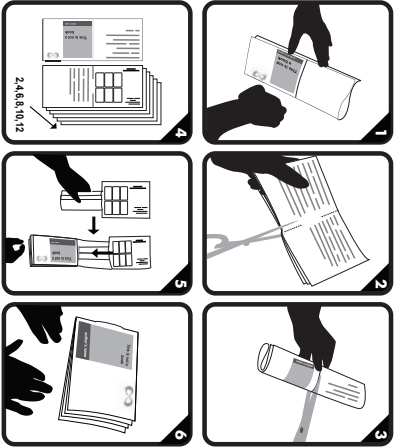
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He searched the fields and the forest, but didn't see a single starling.



Professor Starling began his explorations in the Norfolk countryside, looking for signs of fellow starlings.



The Professor waited, looking and listening, but there were no starlings.



At the old Warreners' Lodge, Professor Starling saw no sign of rabbit nor starling.

– *Hazem Tagiuri and Giles Lane of Proboscis.*

Much has been spoken of the Town and Gown in Oxford, of the bad blood that inked the pages of its early academic history. Students in the middle ages were clad in vestments unsuitable for physical labour, clearly setting them apart from town folk, and were under the legal protection of the clergy from civil law. Subsequent abuses committed led to long tensions which no doubt fostered the violence of the Battle of St. Scholastica, which erupted on February 10, 1355, leaving approximately 93 dead. On that day every year until 1825, the town mayor and his councillors were required to proceed bareheaded through the town and pay a fine for every scholar killed. This humiliation must have withered the locals' pride in their town, or even encouraged their displacement.

We suspect the opposing forces we will find in Oxford today are not the academic and the townie, but the different exuding effects of privatised and public spaces, and of constructed and organically evolving narratives, on all of its citizens.

Through Professor Starling, an avian ambassador who is able to manoeuvre between the currents of accepted beliefs and common sensibilities, we hope to hear

unfiltered thoughts – testimonies that break free from the vast murmuration.



In Thetford, near the river, the Professor thought he might have heard the song of an unseen starling.



He headed into town to ask the people of Thetford about their starlings.

displacement that often drift past us, masked by the smoke trails of frantic city life.

We're wondering how people will react to this unusual character in a place so versed in urban spectacle. Street performers earning a crust, contrived marketing stunts, festival troupes in all manner of costumes. Daily occurrences that pepper London life, both for those visiting briefly and those entrenched in it. Tourists might be more receptive, although less knowledgeable of its spaces. Are Londoners willing to stop and converse, or will the Professor have to target the easy strollers, the stationary workers, those in havens from the hubbub?

– **Oxford** –

In stark contrast to Thetford, Oxford is a city of sustained narratives, consciously preserved so that the next generation can inscribe their chapter. If the former is constructed from lore, then Oxford is law; not in any particular criminal justice sense, but as a unflinching force of academic institutions and traditions that govern the passage of knowledge through its scholars and students. The ensuing prominence of its aged structures and the influence of its prestige is the inverse of Thetford's ruins and its relative obscurity. However, is there room for stories that do not form part of curated collections?

Kings House Garden used to be home to many startings but on this day the Professor saw none.



of rapid growth and change, and can be used as a motif to trigger tales of influx and

noticing new facets of the city through his curiosities and hearing stories from the margins, evoked by his esteemed presence. Like London, the Starling is a symbol

accumulated years of travelling through its streets. We want to revisit everyday sites accompanied by Professor Starling, walking in the wake of an outside observer,

– London –

for new stories, to populate the voids of the past?

We are intrigued by what the missing objects might be, stranded far from a collective array and interpretation. Perhaps we will find the modern treasures of Thetford; value transgressing from hard base metals to the transitory knowledge of skilled trades, or the fables uttered by elderly oracles of wisdom. Or is there more call

secrecy and inaccuracy, and it is widely suggested the hoard is incomplete.

important enough to now reside in the British Museum, the discovery is shrouded by

properties – sulphur filled pendants to protect against evil spirits, magical words etched in gems. What historians have been able to deduce from this find is matched

by the mystery that still surrounds it. Though this treasure has been deemed



In London the search continued, but where large roosts once lived there were only tourists and pigeons.

as a stage to perform, our creative endeavours that arise from both joy and strife alike – spurred by coping with barren lands, or the reveries in green grass on the other side.

– Thetford –

Thetford's deep history is a narrative riddled with uncertainties, one knitted with alluring threads of arcane lore. We hope to tease these out, investigating significant sites and objects that still resonate with the past, guided by information that circulates in the present, and by listening to peoples' accounts of disappearing sights, as told to Professor Starling.

The Priory drew pilgrims in the 13th century, after a supposed appearance of the Virgin Mary, and the discovery of a number of saints' relics in a statue of her likeness. A mass of crumbled flint walls and dissipated arches are all that remain. Can its former awe be glimpsed today, its minute traces lifted from the rubble?

Knowledge of this town, gained from archaeological evidence, is often followed by rumours. The Thetford Hoard, a collection of Romano-British jewellery and tableware unearthed in 1979, bears inscriptions and imagery that allude to paganism, and it's thought many of the items were crafted for their talismanic

room (they made the bird for Hunter and Hirmer the previous year). It is here I learn that the great bustard is the largest flying bird on earth and that it has been absent from the United Kingdom for 180 years. I feel a profound sense of sadness and loss and think on Professors Starling's plight to reconnect with his local ancestors. Will the starlings of Great Britain go the way of the great bustards? I can't imagine this happening, for starlings in Canada are considered pests, much in the same way thylacines were considered nuisances by the peoples of Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea over a century ago.

Some thoughts on our travels with Professor William Starling by Proboscis.

– Introduction –

We're interested in the intangible – discovering, documenting and sharing awareness of the flow of crucial knowledge, skills, and stories that support and weave amidst the visible structures of societies. Where there are missing parts we cannot see, where there are lacunae, we seek to travel to the cavities, navigating the seemingly empty spaces and unheard tales of towns and cities that course through the rigid matrix of bone.

Learning of Professor Starling's research expedition we were inspired by the concept of migration, not just how animals or humans travel to more favourable pastures, but how ideas, perceptions and tales shift across lands and through layers of history, often losing fragments along the way. Traces of past settlements, pages from aged tomes, residues left behind from noted acts; these can help us to glean narratives from the niches. To inspire and create new ones.

Comparing life then with life now. Life there with life here. So that we may study the phenomenon of the human animal living with one another, under shelter, under rule, throughout the ages. Examining how the spaces we inhabit inform, and act

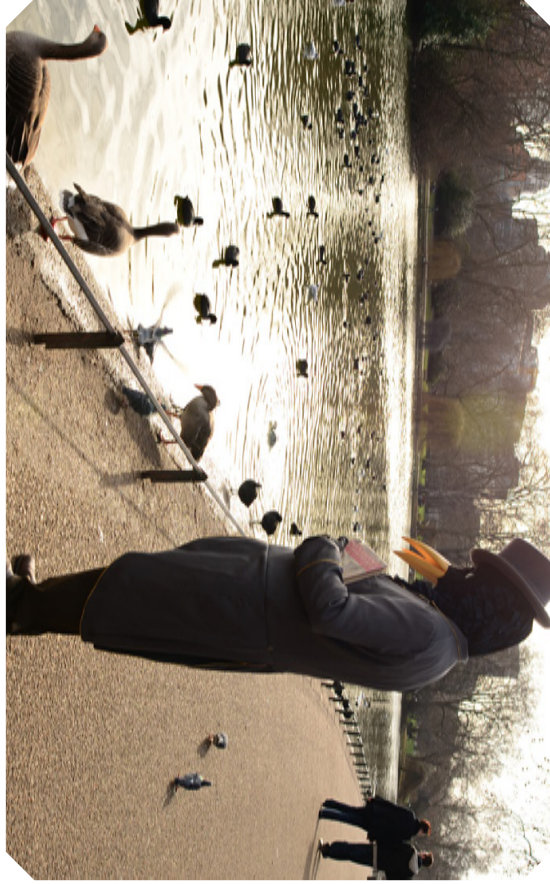


Even with no signs of starlings, the Professor learned much in the city of London.



The city had huge flocks of people but no flocks of the small birds the Professor was looking for.

In St. James's Park, Professor Starling saw many birds but none of them were starlings.



Mills and I then wander into an Ancient House on Whitehart Street where we meet a group of women who knit fantastical creatures. Amazingly, they have knowledge of the dodos and show us a woollen Great Bustard in a neighbouring

professor quite a good listener.

The professor is not at all shy and feels comfortable communing with the townfolk. I witness an interaction on King Street, not far from the Bell Inn, where he speaks at length with a rather rough looking gentleman. I cannot convey the subject matter of their conversation, but the man seems quite animated, and the

cannot think why.

Yesterday, Hirmer, Mills, Lane, Tagiuri, and I spend the day in the company of Professor Starling. I notice that Hunter vanishes when the professor appears to us just northwest of the Priory ruins. I suspect he is afraid of the professor, although I

Larling, Norfolk, England; Saturday 18, 2012:

Captain Hook (of Peter Pan fame) with twinkling eyes and a handsome mustache. The other, Hazem Tagiuri, is significantly younger and resembles a tall, slender, ruddy checked first mate. I surmise that Proboscis is actually a tall sailing ship.



With little luck in Thetford and London, the Professor's search for starlings continued in Oxford.

I must stop myself from prattling on at length about the lodge and its surrounding landscape, for it is the most magnificent thing I have seen to date. Built in the 15th century, it protected gamekeepers and hunting parties from poachers.

On the encompassing land are rolling, sandy hillocks created by the rabbits, farmed here for centuries. The mounds are covered in dense mosses and heather. Indeed, Hunter is concerned Hirmer might disappear beneath the surface from all her jumping up and down on their spongy surface.

Have I mentioned that the local landscape is thick with small, tusked deer?

Thetford, Norfolk, England; Friday, February 17, 2012:

Hunter leaves us with Hirmer in a Portuguese café in Thetford to retrieve the Proboscis from a train station in a neighboring town. Hirmer tells us of an elaborate dream she has had in which Hunter becomes Captain Deciduous, a tree-like super hero. I make a rendering of this Captain Deciduous in my sketchbook for further contemplation.

Hunter arrives with Proboscis, which, in turns out, is not a large nose prosthetic, but two male aboriginals. Giles Lane, the eldest, brings to mind an elfin

He explored the city, keeping an eye out for birds.



Larling, Norfolk, England; Wednesday, February 15, 2012:

The dodos arrive early for what we believe will be the first appearance of Professor Starling, a bird who has made his way from Dundas, Ontario to the ancestral lands of his people. We leave the cottage to make our way to St. Ethelbert's hoping for an encounter and are not disappointed. There he is, parting the horses in the adjacent paddock.

I must pause here to describe the professor's physical appearance so you, dear reader, will understand our delight and amazement at spying him for the first time. He is a striking figure, standing 6 feet high, much taller than any other starling I have known. His head is round, in the typical fashion, with glistening black and blue-ish feathers, and a strong, shapely beak. However, he is a bit of a dandy, donning a grey felt top hat and attractive grey frock coat with handsome vest beneath. Once we introduce ourselves, he accompanies us to the church where we were able to study its Norman architectural features and striking flint stone façade.

Strangely, Hunter refuses to leave the cottage to meet the professor but rejoins us after the professor has departed. He then drives us to the ruins of the Warren Lodge.



Professor Starling asked the gardeners when they had last seen starlings.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Monday, February 13, 2012:

Mills and I make our way southeast via steam engine and are met at a station in Cambridge by the dodos. They appear to be very much alive. The male, Andrew Hunter, is larger than the female, and far more gregarious. Although he too is Canadian, he seems quite adept at driving the people mover on the wrong side of the road. The female, Lisa Hirmer, is made completely out of marzipan but, despite this fact, seems intelligent and capable. Back in Canada she designed humidors for people with special needs. They drive us further east to a farm in Larling, Norfolk, our first jumping off point.

Larling, Norfolk, England; Tuesday, February 14, 2012:

I wake before Mills and stumble into the kitchen of the cottage in which we are now housed. Through the window I spy a most glorious 11th century church, St. Ethelbert's, two horses, and a flock of bustling creatures called Guinea Fowl. I wonder what the guinea fowl taste like.

At the Museum of Natural History the Professor ended the day thinking about another bird, the extinct dodo.



Some Thoughts on My Recent Travels in the United Kingdom

Recently, while engaged in ongoing research on my species, I came upon some facts that compelled me to undertake a journey of inquiry to the country of my ancestors. My line of the family *Sturnus Vulgaris* had emigrated, with some assistance from your species, to North America in the early 1890s, landing in New York City's Central Park at the invitation of a rather unusual and eccentric individual, one Eugene Schieffelin. It seems that Mr. Schieffelin had a desire that all of the songbirds appearing in the works of William Shakespeare should be brought to American shores. He also believed that the introduction of my species would be of great benefit to agriculturalists – a belief that was at the heart of the formation of the Acclimatization Society, which he had become local president of. Whether we have been of benefit remains open to debate. However, North America is a land where we have thrived and flourished; we have adapted to a wide variety of landscapes and habitats including dense urban areas and the sprawling suburbs with their extensive lawns and gardens.

I am sure, therefore, that you can appreciate my great shock in hearing that while my line of the family has prospered, our ancestral population in the United

Edinburgh, Scotland; Saturday, February 11, 2012:

Eventually we make our way eastward to Edinburgh where we discover

scores of magnificently mangy, thrashbare taxidermed birds and mammals from the 18th and 19th century, housed in Scotland's National Institute for the Preservation of Objects and Ideas. They seem to enjoy hanging sea creatures from the ceiling here, having the space above one's head stand in for the ocean. I am worried I might drown. Mills and I discover a case containing a Dodo bird. After careful examination of the specimen, I can find no signs of life. I confirm it is extinct.

I am both captivated and disturbed by the stuffed Thylacine, the largest known carnivorous marsupial to have survived into the 20th century. I can't help but to run film footage of the last captured thylacine over and over in my head. There it is, in 1933, pacing in its Hobart Zoo pen in Tasmania. It yawns.

to its size and inability to adapt, although many believe hunting by humans was also a major factor.

Glasgow, Scotland; Wednesday, February 8, 2012:

Mills and I travel via airship and arrive on the continent a week before we are to liaise with the rest of the team. We cross over into the most Northern country, Scotland, and establish ourselves at a boarding house situated beside the central train station in the bustling burg of Glasgow. Here we are perfectly situated to undertake some preliminary research on this strange new land.

Glasgow, Scotland; Thursday, February 9, 2012:

We begin with the Kelvingrove Institute, a sizeable castle-like structure housing a comprehensive range of art and antiquities collected by the locals. Here, I am much impressed by the skeleton of an Irish Elk (which they had charmingly mislabelled as a giant deer) and an exhibition on Australian tribal throat singers called AC/DC.

I am awestruck by the skeleton of the Irish elk, for it is not unlike the Canadian moose in many respects. Its scientific name is *Megaloceros giganteus* and, prior to the last glacial period, it roamed Eurasia standing over 6 feet tall, with an antler span of up to 12 feet. The Irish elks' extinction, some 8,000 years ago, is linked

European Starling or *Sturnus Vulgaris*
A wood-engraving by Thomas Bewick published
in *History of British Birds* [1797]



Please find below excerpts from the journal of one Leila Armstrong, Canadian artist and general ne'er-do-well on the Professor Starling Expedition.

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada; Wednesday, December 14, 2011:

It is to be my first foray off the island of North America. In preparation, I turn to the most prestigious and comprehensive library on the island. While the building isn't much to look at, the tomes contained within the Interwebbleian are extensive. I search the card catalogue for reference books under the headings "Bizarre Britain," "haunted Thetford," "unusual Oxford," and "weird London."

Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada; Friday, January 13, 2012:

The knowledge I gain during my frequent visits to the Interwebbleian are proving invaluable, as my understanding of the expedition is sketchy at best. All the information comes to me via a single source, the intrepid curator and director Dr. Josephine Mills. I know we are to work with two dodos – birds I believe to be sphere-shaped, obtuse, and extinct – and Proboscis, a large nose prosthetic.

and songs, in hopes of spotting my kind locked in ancient patterns of routine hidden recesses of urban infrastructure, listening for our distinct warblings, twittering my fellow starlings, watching the skies, the trees, expanses of green earth, and the (including their own!). During these outings I obviously kept an eye and ear out for is in decline and, if they wished, to offer connections to the plight of other species and to ascertain if they could offer explanations or theories as to why my species to inform them of my program of inquiry, to determine their level of awareness myself to follow the unexpected and to engage – whenever possible – with the public; In each location, I set about to wander along a determined route yet allowed via brant shops, and to places of great gatherings of people.

of learning and public education near upon which large murmurations are said to continue to gather. I was accompanied on these travels by several equally curious and concerned, Giles Lane and Hazem Tagiuri of Proboscis, Dr. Josephine Mills and Leila Armstrong from Lethbridge, Alberta, in the Canadian West, and my colleagues from DodoLab, Lisa Hirmer and Andrew Hunter, who continue to facilitate my travels and research. In each setting, our peregrinations took us to a variety of sites, from old churches through abandoned ruins and landscapes, actively cultivated and constructed terrain through libraries, museums and high streets and amongst vibrant shops, and to places of great gatherings of people.

much broader significance and wider implications. The decline of a once common and numerous species suggests disturbances and disruptions that will very likely have serious impacts on other species, including, dear reader, your own.

My journey to the United Kingdom took me to three locations which were determined by the historical presence of significant numbers of European Starlings. First, the town of Thetford and the rural countryside of East Anglia where there is extensive agriculture and a number of small historic market towns. Second, the great city of London, particularly at its heart where large flocks of starlings had once chosen to gather. Third, the city of Oxford, with its ancient colleges and institutions

Kingdom has been in steady decline. Over recent decades, *Sturnus Vulgaris* has suffered a mysterious and as yet unexplained decline in numbers in the range of seventy percent! As a learned itinerant scholar of all things avian, with a particular focus on extinction and adaptation to change, I felt it necessary to inquire for myself and to travel amongst the good people of England to find out if anyone had noticed these disappearances and, furthermore, what explanations they may offer for such a tragic occurrence. I undertook this journey of inquiry not only for my own edification and the good of my species, but to contemplate the wider significance of such changes. As is so often the case, dramatic changes in the patterns of nature have much broader significance and wider implications. The decline of a once common and numerous species suggests disturbances and disruptions that will very likely have serious impacts on other species, including, dear reader, your own.