



Barn Owl hunting Starlings at Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve in February 2017.

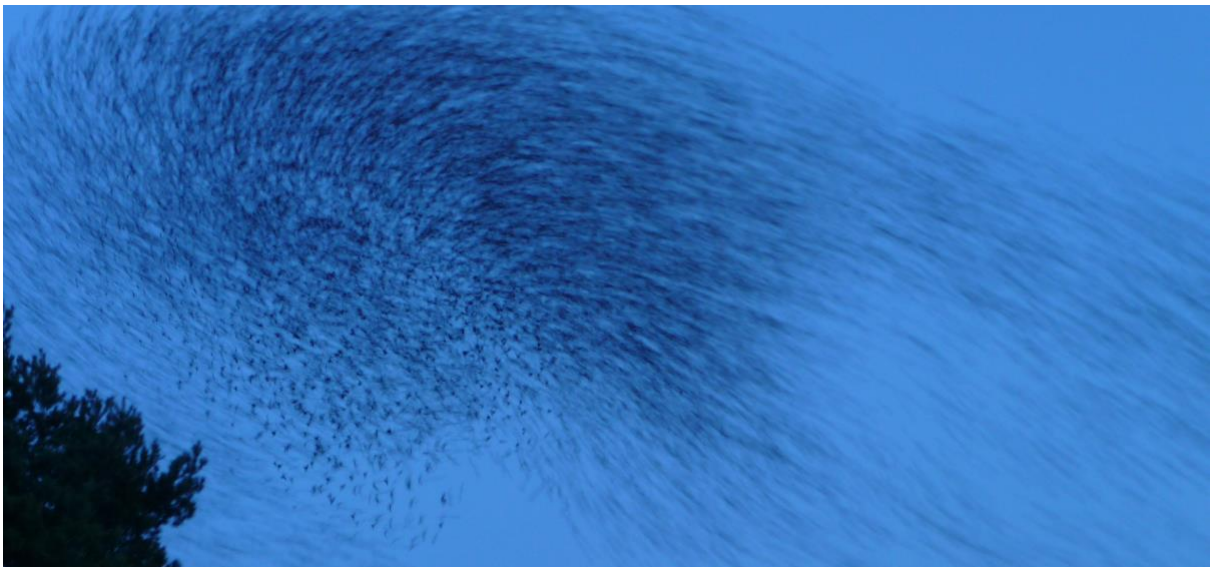
Rob Prudden

During the first three weeks of February 2017 a large Starling roost had built up to an estimated 15,000 birds. During this period three Sparrowhawks had taken to hunting the pre-roost flocks each evening and were also present as the roost broke up and left the site around dawn each morning. A small male Peregrine also joined in some evenings although its attacks appeared to be only half hearted.

More interesting was the behaviour of a Barn Owl which each evening would perch on one of several different fence posts around the site as the Starlings started to form their pre-roost flocks. The Owl would watch intently from its vantage point to ascertain which reed bed roost area would be chosen. This tended to vary from night to night depending on wind direction and general weather conditions. When part of the flock poured into a chosen roost site

the Owl would head directly to this area and while the Starlings were still excitedly and noisily jostling for position in the already partially flattened reed beds, would drop into the melee, rising again almost instantly, and having selected an unfortunate screaming bird, carried it off into the failing light.

After witnessing the Owls successful hunting technique on several occasions an investigation of a nearby derelict wooden building, where the Owl was known to spend time, led to an interesting find. Under the Owls favoured perch was a scene of Starling destruction: twenty-six complete wings, several heads and legs and numerous loose wing and tail feathers. The Owl had obviously taken at least some of its catches to the shed to strip off some of the non-edible parts before swallowing the partially de-feathered corpses. Numerous pellets were also scattered, with most of these appearing to contain at least some Starling feathering. During the last week of the month the Owl was again seen low over the reed beds on several occasions but the fickle nature of the Starlings had seen them all move on almost over-night: the brief and easy bonanza was over.



Images

01. Starlings at Kemerton roost. R Poloni.

02 Starlings at Kemerton roost. R. Poloni