

SAVE OUR HIGHLAND'S STARLINGS

IN NORTH HIGHLAND

A COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS
PROJECT

ANDY SUMMERS



↙
2025/26

Aim: to increase availability of suitable nesting cavities for starlings through community engagement

INTRODUCTION

Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are one of the UK's most recognisable birds, known for their iridescent feathers, mimicry, and dramatic winter murmurations. Despite this, they are in serious decline. In Scotland, starling numbers fell by 48% between 1994 and 2022, and the species is now Red Listed.

This project sought to make a meaningful regional contribution by installing and monitoring purpose-built starling nest boxes across the northern Highlands, a wide geographic area.



Project Overview



The project began in spring 2025 with the construction of fifty purpose-built starling nest boxes, 39 of which were installed during the first breeding season. Monitoring showed that starlings attempted to nest in nearly a quarter of these boxes, with high breeding success where egg-laying occurred. Other cavity-nesting birds also used several boxes, indicating wider biodiversity benefit.

39

Nest Boxes installed

9

Starling nests initiated

27

Starlings fledged

The nest boxes were installed across the Highlands in school grounds, community buildings, local parks, and other sites where natural nesting cavities have been lost.



Educational Benefits



Nature Conservation

- Observing bird nesting, feeding, and fledging firsthand.
- Learning about species decline and conservation needs
- Introducing ethical wildlife monitoring

Geography

- Learning that Highland starlings include resident and migratory birds.
- Understanding seasonal movements from Scandinavia and northern Russia.
- Exploring why birds migrate and how places are connected.

Technical Skills

- Measuring timber, entrance holes, and box dimensions accurately.
- Understanding correct height and placement of nest boxes.
- Learning safe, supervised use of hand tools.

This project provided a cross-curricular learning experience, using starling conservation and nest box work as a foundation for learning across several subjects, with activities designed to be practical, engaging, and accessible to a wide range of learners.





Key Findings

The project demonstrated that providing artificial nest sites can deliver tangible benefits for breeding starlings at a local and regional scale. Nearly a quarter of installed nest boxes were used by starlings in the first year, which is considered high for a newly established scheme, particularly given that cavity-nesting birds often take time to adopt new boxes. Where nesting progressed to egg-laying, breeding success was strong, with all such nests fledging young and an average productivity consistent with a favourable breeding season. The use of boxes by other species also highlighted wider biodiversity gains from the intervention.

A second key finding was the value of combining habitat provision with community and school engagement. Involving pupils and community sites in monitoring increased awareness of starling ecology, migration, and conservation challenges, while reinforcing good practice in ethical wildlife observation. This participatory approach supported learning across science, geography, and practical skills, and helped embed a sense of stewardship for local biodiversity.

Together, these outcomes suggest that small-scale, well-designed interventions can contribute meaningfully to conservation while strengthening regional understanding and engagement.



SAVE OUR HIGHLAND STARLINGS



MAKING LIFE BETTER



STARLINGS ARE IN DECLINE



48% decrease in Scotland's starling population (1994–2022)



NEST BOXES

50 starling nest boxes constructed


39 nest boxes installed across Highland schools and community sites



OCCUPANCY

23% of the nest boxes that were put up had starlings attempting to nest

18% had other birds (house sparrows, great tits) attempting to use



BREEDING SUCCESS

27 starling chicks fledged from 7 successful nests

ENGAGEMENT

Schools and communities involved learning through hands-on conservation



MAKING LIFE BETTER



Conclusion



Photo Credit : Andy Summers



The Save our Highland's Starlings project has shown that targeted, small-scale conservation action can deliver measurable benefits for a declining species, while also building understanding and support within local communities. However, the challenges facing starlings mirror those affecting many other species across the Highlands, where habitat loss, changing land use, and wider environmental pressures continue to reduce opportunities for wildlife to thrive.

These findings underline the need for sustained and expanded conservation efforts across the region. Providing nesting sites, improving habitats, and engaging people directly in conservation activity are all essential if we are to halt and reverse declines in once-common species. Projects like this demonstrate that practical, collaborative action can make a difference, but meaningful recovery will depend on continued commitment, coordinated effort, and long-term investment in the natural environment of the Highlands.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible thanks to the generous support of donations to the High Life Highland Ranger Service and paid subscribers to Nature Unveiled, whose contributions directly funded the construction and installation of the starling nest boxes.

We are also extremely grateful to Steve Langford for his practical support and expertise in building the boxes, and to the participating schools, teachers, pupils, and community volunteers for their enthusiasm, commitment, and engagement. Their willingness to take part in monitoring and learning activities played a vital role in the success of the Save our Highland's Starlings project.



Photo Credit : D. Haines



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