

Dead birds in Franklin Township were killed on purpose

by [Brian Murray](#)/The Star-Ledger

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Hundreds of birds that dropped dead on Somerset County cars, porches and snow-covered lawns, alarming residents over the weekend, were all of a rather foul breed of fowl--the notorious European starling, which the United States Department of Agriculture killed on purpose.

The starling, a prominent figure in Shakespeare's "Henry IV," has become a royal nuisance in North America. They have been invading farms and pushing out native wildlife since a New York City group infatuated with the playwright released about 100 imported starlings in Central Park in 1890 and 1891.



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O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER Many dead starlings have been found in Franklin Township, including this bird on Park Lane.

It was part of an ill-conceived plan by the American Acclimatization Society to fill America with all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's works. Now, the USDA is acknowledging making a few mistakes of its own by not more fully warning people around a Princeton Township farm, where it applied a pesticide on Friday to kill 3,000 to 5,000 starlings that have been plaguing a livestock farmer.

"It was raining dead birds," said Franklin Township Mayor Brian Levine, explaining how people watched starlings drop throughout the Griggstown section of his town, which borders Princeton Township in Mercer County.

"People were concerned. They were wondering why there were so many dead birds lying around," he said.

Everything from Avian influenza to West Nile disease, both bird-killing ailments that also affect humans, was feared. But no humans or pets were ever at risk, said the USDA, contending the pesticide, known as DRC-1339, is inert once it is eaten by the birds and becomes metabolized.

That part of the story is only now reaching residents in Somerset County's Franklin Township, where officials continued efforts today to help citizens find ways to dispose of the bird corpses filling up their lawns.

"Unfortunately, this was also done on a Friday, so the birds died on the weekend when no one was around to respond to calls. I can just imagine it would have been very disconcerting for people to find the birds dead," said Carol Bannerman, a USDA spokeswoman.

State agriculture and wildlife officials were notified two weeks ago, along with Somerset County officials. But Ken Daly, Franklin Township's administrator, said the township was told too little, too late.

"The only notice we got in the municipal building was on Friday, a second-hand phone call from our county health director that somewhere, sometime the USDA would be culling birds. No one knew what that meant. If we had known it was coming, we could have gotten word out to the residents," he said.

The pesticide was applied by the USDA on bait piles at the farm, and federal authorities said there was one other miscalculation.

While the pesticide has been used in the past in densely populated New Jersey, this time the starlings moved far off the Mercer County farm where they ingested it.

"In a rural situation the birds would have concentrated in one roosting location.

Apparently here, they were feeding in one location and roosting elsewhere, in areas quite dispersed and away from the farm," Bannerman said.

She said the farmer had tried non-lethal efforts before calling the USDA.

"The farmer has a variety of livestock, and the birds would eat the seed which takes food away from the livestock, costs the farmer money. Also, as the birds eat, they excrete droppings into the food left for the livestock to eat. It was a very unhealthy situation," Bannerman said.

"The farmer had tried other non-lethal methods, like changing the food he was feeding his animals, dispersing the birds, trying to chase them away and having predator birds on the farm. There just wasn't any impact," she added.

Starlings move in large flocks and are very aggressive. They will push native birds, including the American kestrel, woodpeckers, martins and blue birds from tree holes and other roosts, especially during breeding season.

But they pose equally troublesome hazards for humans, with starling flocks colliding with aircraft, fouling power stations and setting up winter roosts in the ornate facades of old towns, defecating on shoppers as well as the buildings. The Town of Dover, in Morris County, tried a long list of non-lethal control efforts before largely giving up its battle with the birds in the 1980s.

"We really didn't solve the problem," said Health Officer Donald Costanzo.

"We used the sound system we use for Christmas music, playing sounds of starlings in distress, which was supposed to get them to leave," he explained. "The sound agitated the starlings, so they would start screeching even more, but they didn't leave. And we had our own sounds of starlings screeching over the speakers. It all just got so annoying to everyone, we turned it off."