

Thousands of starlings fly together to make an enormous bird

This amazing photograph was taken by James Crombie in Ireland. It shows a murmuration of thousands of starlings acting like a single giant creature to confuse predators

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Photographer James Crombie

THIS extraordinary image, taken as dusk approaches, looks like a soaring bird from a fantasy film. In reality, it is a murmuration – a huge swarm of starlings moving and pulsating as a single spectacular mass in the sky.

Murmurations can comprise up to hundreds of thousands of flying starlings, though few are quite as dramatic as this one. Photojournalist James Crombie captured it over Lough

Ennall, a lake near Mullingar in Ireland, after more than 50 visits in which he took hundreds of shots.

Starlings are thought to form murmurations to protect themselves from [predators](#), such as peregrine falcons, since it is much harder to single out an individual among such large numbers.

The birds can coordinate themselves because they respond so quickly to their neighbours. No single starling leads the swarm. Instead, each individual reacts as its neighbour changes direction or speed. We now know that starlings do this in [groups of around seven](#): the movements of each small unit rapidly scale up to the entire murmuration, resulting in the shape-shifting masses.

How the birds manage to avoid collisions is still a bit of a mystery, but one idea suggests that when certain starlings initiate a turn, the decision spreads through the rest of the murmuration like a [wave](#).