

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

**EUROPEAN STARLING: DISSOCIATION OF IMITATION AND SYNTACTIC DEVELOPMENT**

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Manuscript received 8 August 2006; accepted 6 June 2007.

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*Abstract.* We performed two studies to test whether the ability of open-ended learners to acquire new songs as adults depends on their having learned normal songs as juveniles. European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) were kept in isolation for their first year. In the first study the birds were housed in a group with a wild-caught adult male following isolation. The subjects imitated each other but not the wild male and failed to develop normal phonology or syntax. In the second study each yearling was housed individually with a wild-caught adult male following isolation. These subjects developed good phonology and syntax but copied few or no song motifs from the wild adults. Taken together, the two studies indicate that starlings are capable of imitating new motifs and of acquiring species-typical phonology and syntax after a year of isolation. The contrasting results of the two studies suggest that imitation and the development of syntax are independent processes subject to different influences.

*Key words:* European Starling, open-ended learning, sensitive periods, social influences, song learning, *Sturnus vulgaris*, syntax.