

**Sample Paper 20****Score for Sentence Fluency \_\_\_\_\_****Starlings: Cheep! Imitators**

“The phone’s ringing,” my father said, never looking up from his workout on our deck. The phone rang again, and this time I heard it, followed by my father’s slightly more insistent voice. “Hey, somebody get the phone! Someone’s cell phone is ringing.”

“Dad, the phone isn’t ringing,” I replied as I continued making myself a sandwich. Trust me, if there were a phone ringing somewhere in our house, I’d be answering it. I could see him through the kitchen window, and he looked up, just as we heard another ring. We stared at each other, wondering what to make of the sound. Clearly, someone’s phone was ringing, but it wasn’t ours. My dad’s cell phone was on the deck railing, and mine was in my jeans pocket. Our house phone was quiet on the kitchen counter. No one else was around—anywhere. The phantom phone rang again. “Well, what in blazes . . .,” my dad started to ask.

Just then a starling flew from a branch just over Dad’s head. As crazy as it sounds, the bird was “ringing” as it flew away. “Dad,” I laughed, “I think it’s for you!” Even he had to laugh.

We discovered what scientists have known for years—that starlings, and their close relatives, grackles, can mimic almost any kind of sound, including the ring tone of a cell phone. In the wild, these birds are more likely to imitate the calls of other birds in their territories. But in captivity, starlings have been known to imitate human speech, music, bells, and various sounds from television or radio. They have even been trained, like a parrot or myna, to converse with their trainers.

For many people, starlings are those annoying birds who gather in trees or on houses during winter in such large numbers that they can actually do damage as they scratch for food and leave behind a whitewash of droppings. They're notoriously unpopular in the Midwest, where they descend in virtual black clouds on crops, consuming enough grain to put a serious dent in farmers' budgets. But before they are written off entirely as pests, people should consider their amazing imitative abilities. The next time you wonder whose cell phone is ringing, check the nearest tree branch. It could be a starling, one of nature's annoying yet extraordinary wonders.

### **Sources**

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