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Mechanisms driving collective escape patterns in starling flocks

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Abstract

European starlings perform a great diversity of patterns of collective behaviour when hunted by aerial predators; their large flocks continuously change shape, size, and internal structure. How these complex patterns emerge by self-organization through 'rules' at the individual level is still unknown. Here, we combine video footage of large flocks of starlings that are pursued by a robotic predator, the RobotFalcon, with simulations in a new data-driven 3-dimentional agent-based model (StarEscape) in order to unravel the emergence of these aerial displays. In vivo, we identified that flock members often differed in their evasive manoeuvres and that different patterns of collective escape arose simultaneously in different parts of the flock. In silica, we investigated how rules of coordination and escape at the individual level generate the group density, internal dynamics, and patterns of collective escape we observed in the field. We show that key factors generating these complex patterns are the type of escape reaction of a few early responders, the speed with which the escape information propagates through the flock, the positions of the evading flock members relative to the predator, and the previous state of the flock (hysteresis). The processes we reveal are key to understanding starling murmurations, while StarEscape is a biologically-relevant tool for the study of both mechanistic and functional aspects of spatiotemporal patterns across many species. Our study highlights the importance of investigating fine-scale dynamics and feedback between the micro and macro levels, such as individual reaction frequency and group geometry, when studying self-organized adaptive systems.

Keywords: collective escape; self-organization; European starling; flocking; predation; agent-based modelling; hysteresis.

Introduction

Some of the most complex patterns of collective behaviour in animals are displayed when groups are threatened by a predator. Rapid changes in shape and internal structure of the group confuse the predator[1,2] and reduce the flock members' risk of getting caught[3,4]. The murmurations of European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*)[5] are one of the best-known phenomena of collective behavior[5,6]; their large flocks exhibit a great diversity of complex patterns, in particular when attacked by aerial predators such as the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)[7,8]. However, besides insight into the collective motion of their flocks[9–12], little is known about what rules of motion and interaction underlie their patterns of collective escape[13,14], knowledge that is vital to understand the adaptive value of these social interactions and the collective spatiotemporal patterns we observe in nature.

In starlings, many patterns of collective escape can be distinguished based on shape, darkness, size, internal structure and dynamics of the flock [7,15], namely the agitation wave, the vacuole, the flash expansion, the collective turn, the cordon, the split, blackening, compacting, and dilution[8] . During an agitation wave, a dark band moves from one side of the flock (closer to the predator) to the other[8,16]. During flash expansion, flock members suddenly move radially outwards (usually away from the attacking predator)[8,17]. The split implies that the flock divides into two or more parts, referred to as sub-flocks[8,18]. During blackening, the flock (or part thereof) appears darker, and during compacting smaller[8]. During dilution, the distance between flock members increases and the flock becomes lighter in color[8]. The vacuole refers to a hole in a polarized flock with the individuals around the hole moving in the same direction, and the cordon to the thin line (cordon) that connects two relatively large parts of the flock[7,8]. Earlier studies have only focused on the relation between the frequency of these patterns and the frequency and timing of predator attacks[7,8,16], without investigating the mechanisms driving their emergence.

The link between individual behaviour and global patterns can be detected through computational models based on self-organization. In case of collective motion, models usually include moving agents that align with and are attracted to each other while avoiding collisions[19–21]. In these models, the emergence of several collective properties have been examined such as flock diffusion[22,23], milling[21,24], and flock shape[25,26]. In case of collective escape, the development of computational models of bird flocks has been constrained by the difficulty of empirical data collection[10,11,13,18,27,28]. So far, only a few patterns of collective escape of starlings and of homing pigeons (*Columba livia)* have been studied in detail[13,14,18,27], using the

computational models *StarDisplay*[11] and *HoPE*[27], respectively. Agitation waves in flocks of starlings were shown to emerge from a fixed zig-zag motion performed by a few individuals close to the predator and copied by their neighbors[13]. Splits and collective turns in pigeons were shown to emerge from a single individual escape manoeuvre involving discrete, sudden turns interrupting the continuous coordinated motion of the group[18]. Most computational models have focused on the emergence of a single type of collective escape (but see [29–31] for studies of fish schools), whereas the simultaneous occurrence of several patterns of collective escape, like in the large murmurations of starlings, have to our best knowledge not been investigated previously.

In the present paper, we examine the mechanisms underlying several patterns of collective escape in starlings, bridging the gap between empirical observations and theory. We analysed video footage assembled in the field by employing a bio-hybrid solution that overcomes the unpredictability of predator attacks in nature[32,33]: flocks of starlings under attack by a remotely-controlled robotic predator, the RobotFalcon[34]. Previous work has established that flocks respond to the RobotFalcon similarly to the real peregrine falcon[34]. Our empirical investigation showed that patterns of collective escape often arise simultaneously in a single flock. To study the emergence of this phenomenon, we developed a biologically inspired 3-dimensional computational model of collective motion and escape specifically for starlings, through pattern-oriented modeling[35] and the use of non-homogenous Markov-chains at the individual-level decision making. We simulated flocks of up to a few thousands of individuals under attack and identified the conditions at which different patterns emerge. We further discovered that hysteresis may underlie the density and shape dynamics of a flock, i.e., its current state is affected by its previous state[21,36].

Results

Collective escape of starling flocks

We analysed data[34,37] in which the RobotFalcon pursued starling flocks of about 20 to 2000 individuals for approximately 20 seconds to 2 minutes (with average pursuit duration of 1 min), during which more than one pattern of collective escape co-occurred. Flocks (N = 10) were stationary in an open field and became airborne in response to the approaching RobotFalcon. Video footage of the pursuit was recorded by both a ground camera and a camera on the RobotFalcon (see supplementary Fig.1 for both camera views)[34].

The patterns of collective escape we observed included the collective turn (Fig. 1A), the split (supplementary Fig. S2), the cordon, the flash expansion, the agitation wave, blackening, compacting (supplementary Fig. S3) and dilution (supplementary Vid. S5). Starlings also executed 'columnar flocking': their flocks often took a vertical shape, elongated in altitude (Fig. 1B, supplementary Vid. S2B), something previously characterized only in flocks of dunlins (*Calidris alpina*)[38,39]. Multiple patterns of collective escape sometimes arose simultaneously in a single flock (Fig. 1B). Specifically the collective turn most often co-occurred with the split, the columnar flocking, or the compacting (Fig. 1C). The cordon seems to arise as a result of delayed information transfer during columnar flocking, when the top of the flock performed consecutive collective turns and the bottom part was following with a small delay (Fig. 1D). The flash expansion appeared at the point where the RobotFalcon attacked (most often in the periphery of the flock), while at the same time in another part of the flock a collective turn or compacting was taking place. Agitation waves were observed only in the largest flock in our dataset. Since its emergence and that of the flash expansion have been studied previously[8,13,14,17], we focused our analysis on the other patterns, see the supplementary Vid. S1. We present a simplified schematic of part of this escape sequence in Fig. 1D, showing that parts of the flock behave differently.

At the individual level, we observed starlings evading the predator by performing level-turns (reverting their flight direction without large changes in altitude, Fig. 1A), dives (changing their altitude away from the predator, Fig. 1B), and diving turns (turning while diving, Fig. 1D). All manoeuvres are marked in the footage in supplementary Vid. S2. We combined these observations with previous knowledge on the collective motion of starlings[11,22,25] to develop our new computational model of collective escape, StarEscape.

StarEscape: an agent-based model of starling flocks

We built a spatially-explicit agent-based model based on self-organization to simulate the collective escape of starlings, named *StarEscape*. Modelling decisions as well as model parameterization and validation is based on the unique quantitative data of flocks in Rome[10,11].The model specifies two types of agents: 'sturnoids' that form flocks, and 'predoids' that chase them (inspired by the 'boids' of Reynolds 1987[19]). Agents move in a large (effectively infinite) 3-dimensional space. They are characterized by a position and a velocity vector in the global coordinate system, and their headings define the local coordinate system through which an agent senses the position and heading of its surrounding agents. Sturnoids have a set of 7 nearest neighbours (topological)[9] with which they interact through attraction, repulsion and alignment. Predoids follow the flock from behind for a given time period, after which they accelerate towards a single sturnoid (target), similar to the

strategy of the RobotFalcon in the field. Agents `update' their information about their surroundings asynchronously with a limited 'reaction' frequency. This reflects the behaviour and cognition of birds in the wild: individuals in a flock do neither react to changes in the position or heading of their neighbours instantaneously nor completely synchronously.

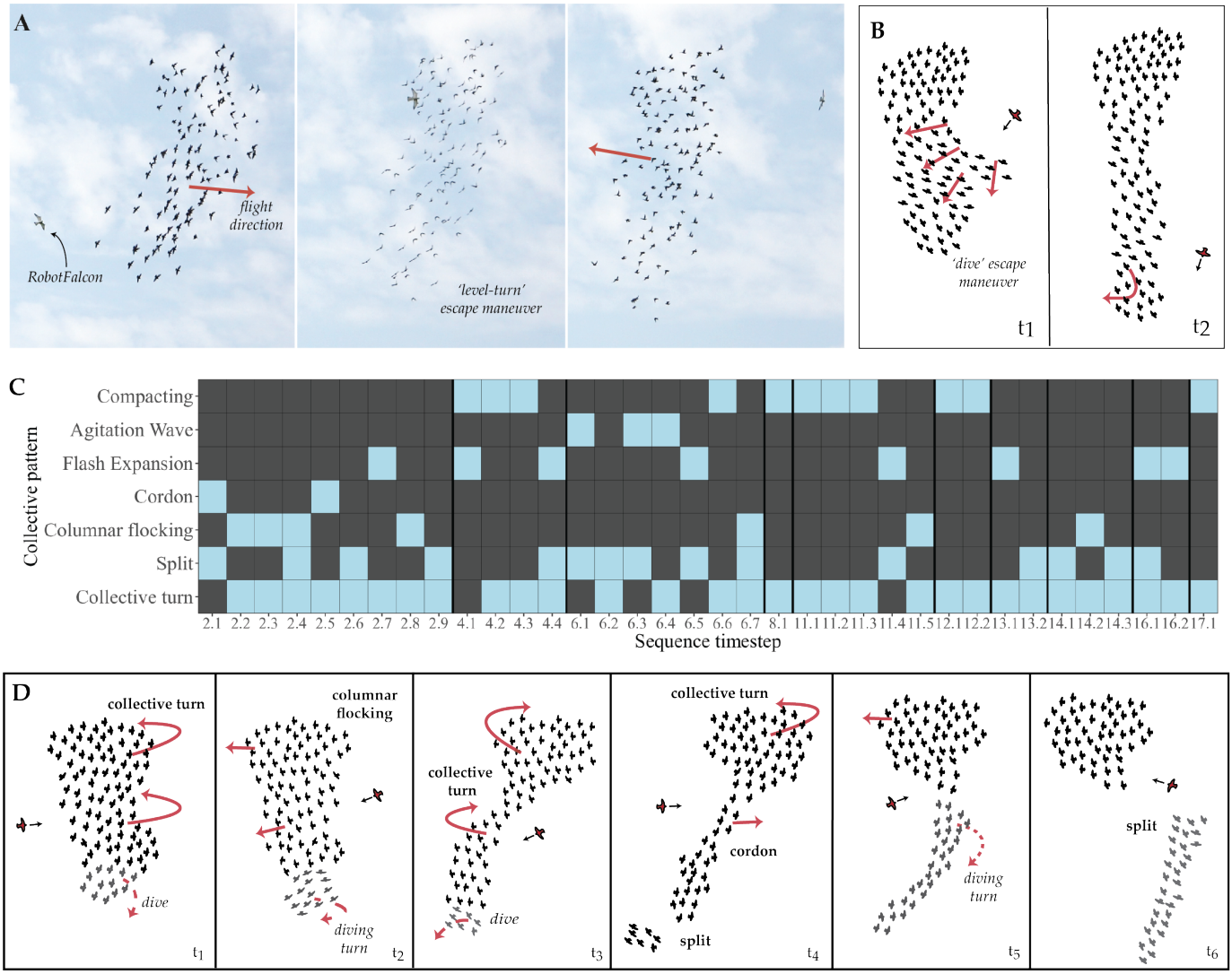

Figure 1. Empirical data of collective escape of starling flocks under attack by the RobotFalcon. (A) Screenshots of a flock performing a collective turn away from the RobotFalcon. Individuals perform a level-turn to evade the predator. The red arrows represent the flight direction of the flock. **(B)** Schematic representation of data of supplementary Vid. S2B: individual starlings (small birds in black) dive away from the RobotFalcon (larger bird in red, with black arrow showing its heading). How much individuals dive seems to relate to their distance to the predator. A columnar shape of the flock emerges. **(C)** Co-occurrence of collective patterns in the empirical data. Every timestep (2.1 – 17.1) corresponds to a small time-window in which certain patterns (light coloured blocks) co-occurred in a given flock (IDs 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17). **(D)** Co-occurrence of different patterns of collective escape (supplementary Vid. S1) where subgroups (parts of the flock) behaved differently. Each window (t_1-t_6) represents a snapshot during the sequence of collective escape. The initial configuration of the flock and relative position to the predator are given at t_1. At t_2, individuals that form the main part of the flock have performed a collective turn in the opposite direction (approx. 180°), while a small number of individuals at the bottom of the flock dived. At t_3, individuals in the top part of the flock continue turning in the same direction, the ones in the middle part (closer to the predator) move slightly downwards (accelerating), while individuals at the bottom perform a diving turn. At t_4, the main flock has performed a collective turn (approx. 180°). Due to the elongation of the flock, a cordon is formed. Individuals in the bottom part of the flock do not turn and continue to dive; as a result, they split from the main flock. At t_5, individuals in the top part of the flock have performed another collective turn. Individuals in the middle and lower part continue their forward motion. At t_6, the top part of the flock continues its forward motion while the bottom part performs a diving turn. As a result, the flock splits in two.

The individual behaviour of sturnoids was split into 4 conceptual states: *flocking, alarmed flocking, escape,* and *refraction*. Transitions between the states are controlled by an individual-based and dynamic (non-homogeneous) Markov-chain. Overall, individuals just coordinate with their neighbours when the predator is far away (*flocking*), and switch to *alarmed flocking* when the predator gets closer, during which they increase their reaction frequency, resembling vigilance[40–42]. An individual performs probabilistically an escape manoeuvre depending on its perceived predation risk (based on its distance

to the predoid, captured in its 'stress' level, see Methods), and its neighbours copy its escape. After executing an escape, individuals remain in the alarmed flocking state but cannot perform another escape manoeuvre for a few seconds (*refraction*). Sturnoids perform two types of escape manoeuvres that we observed in the starling flocks: level turns and dives.

We analysed simulated flocks of 20-2000 sturnoids (see supplementary Vid. S3, S4, S6, and S7). The simulated flocks resembled flocks of starlings in their average speed (9.5 ± 0.32 m/s), nearest neighbour distance (NND = 0.86 ± 0.08 m, Fig. 2A) and stability of neighbours over a 3 seconds time window ($Q_4(3s)$ = 0.58 ± 0.06, Fig. 2B)[2,10,22]. The variability of flock shape in our model in the absence of a predator is also qualitatively similar to real flocks (Fig. 2C).

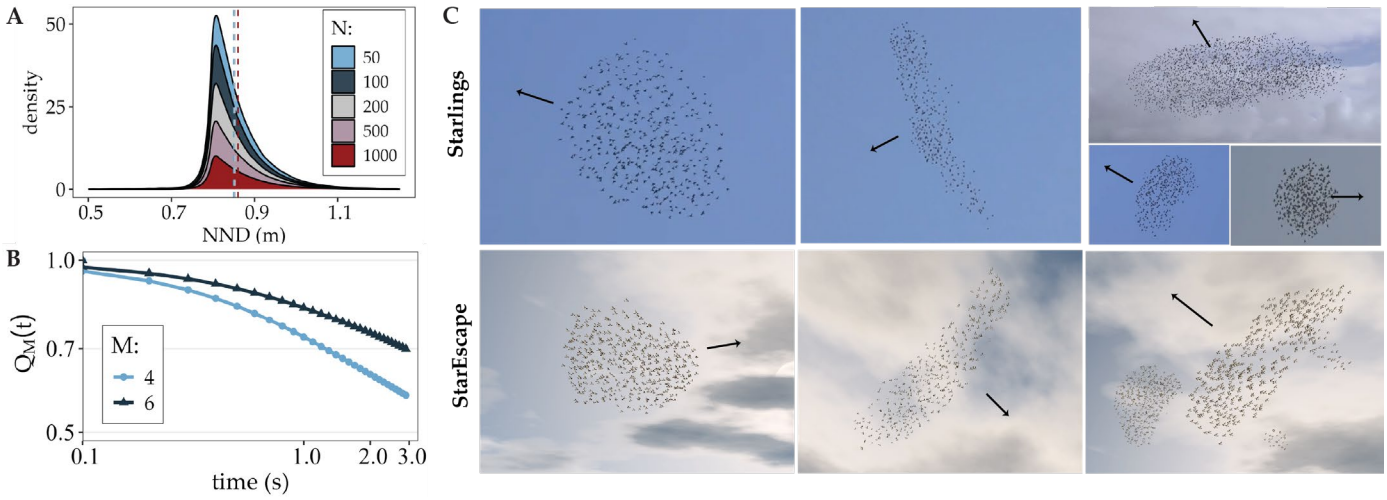

Figure 2. Flocking in StarEscape. (A) Distributions of nearest neighbour distance (NND) of simulated flocks of different sizes (N = 50-1000). The vertical lines indicate the average density (NND) for flocks of 50, 200, and 1000 individuals. **(B)** The average stability of neighbours (Q_M, with M being the number of closest neighbours included in its calculation) over time in the simulated flocks. The timeseries of both NND and Q_M are exported by the model. **(C)** Flocks of different sizes and shapes in starling flocks (top row) and the StarEscape model (bottom row). The arrows show the direction of motion of the flock.

The emergence of collective patterns

Several patterns of collective escape emerged from sturnoids performing level-turning and diving manoeuvres (Fig. 3). Note that the diving turn that we observed in the empirical data (Fig. 1D, $t_{2,5}$) was not explicitly modelled, but diving turns emerged in our simulations when an individual reacted to the predoid with a turn without having levelled its pitch after a previous diving manoeuvre (see supplementary Fig. S4). Compacting emerged in our model from the flock becoming alarmed (with more frequent interactions among individuals) when the predoid was approaching (supplementary Fig. S5).

In our simulations, collective turns of the whole flock propagated from a single or a few early responders with similar positions relative to the predator (Fig. 3A, supplementary Vid. S3). Splits of sub-flocks emerged when a part of a flock was performing a collective turn and another part did not follow (Fig. 3B), i.e., when the level-turn did not propagate fast enough through the group. A split emerged also when two early responders turned in opposite directions, being each followed by their own subset of neighbours (Fig. 3B-3C). This happened particularly when the predator approached from behind the middle of a flock, resulting in the two halves of the flock having different escape directions. Thus, sub-flock splits almost always co-occur with collective turns. Due to the copying mechanism, singletons rarely split off, and when they did it was from the periphery of large flocks. During sharp escape manoeuvres, blackening, compacting, and collective turn co-occurred (Fig. 3C). Blackening during collective turning may relate to both the relative orientation of the flock and the observer, and to an increase in group density.

Diving manoeuvres usually led to columnar flocking and cordons (Fig. 3D-3F). Since the diving tendency of each individual increases when it is closer to the predator, columnar flocks emerged when the tendency of a flock member to dive resembled that of its neighbours. This is for instance the case in spherical flocks: the predoid is at a similar distance to a number of sturnoids at the back of the flock and the flock elongates vertically because these individuals that are closer to the predator reposition themselves downwards sequentially. If the predoid approaches the lower half of the flock, a dive may propagate only towards that lower part (supplementary Fig. S6). In this case, since flock members were still coordinating, there were a few sturnoids in the middle that were influenced by the position and heading of the diving individuals but did not dive themselves. As a result, these sturnoids, along with the top individuals of the diving subgroup, formed a 'cordon', connecting the two larger parts of the flock (Fig. 3E). If the predoid performed a fast attack at the bottom of the flock, a sub-flock split

off, because a small number of individuals at the edge with higher predation risk rapidly dived. Collective turns while in columnar flocking, as observed in our empirical data (see Fig. 1A, schematic of Fig. 1D, and supplementary Vid. S1), also emerged in StarEscape (supplementary Vid. S4).

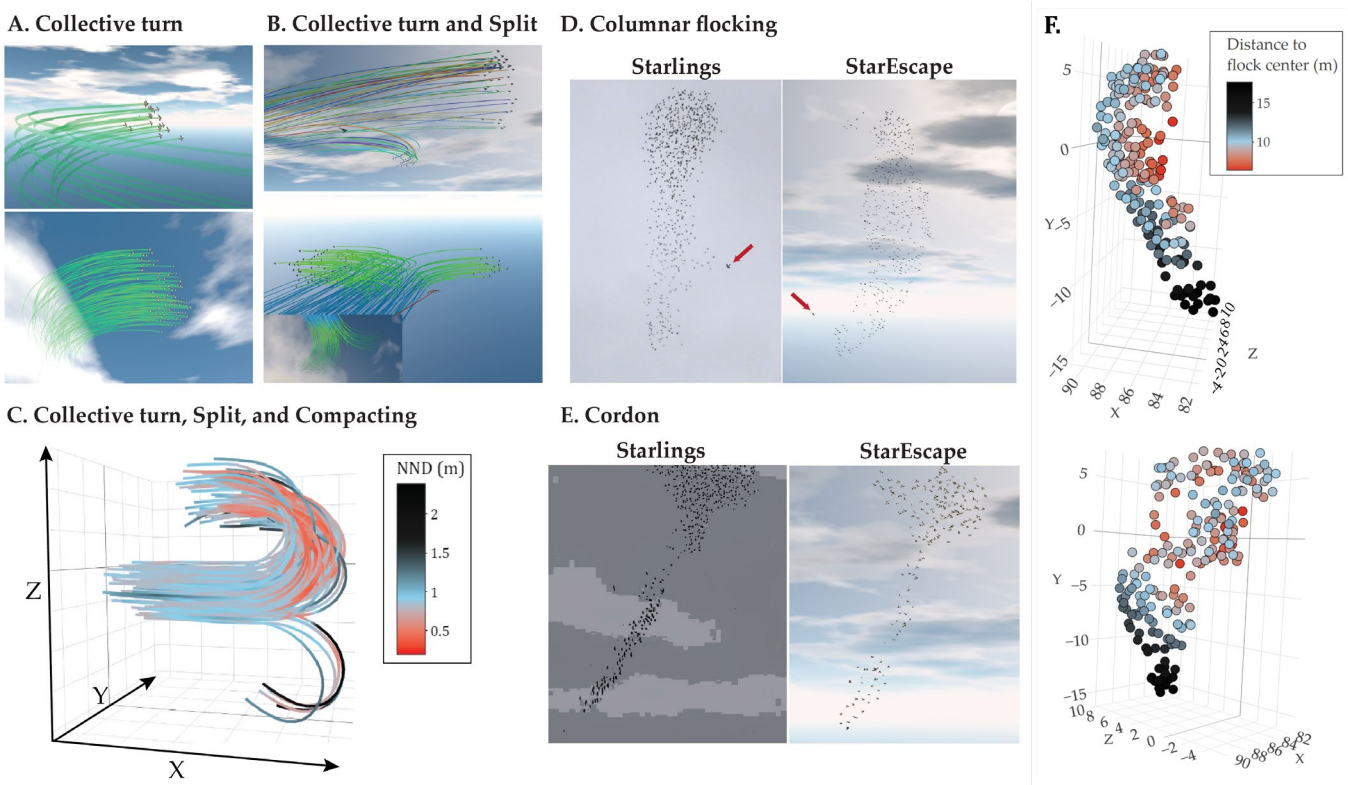

Figure 3. Patterns of collective escape in StarEscape. (A) Collective turns in flocks of 20 (top) and 200 (bottom) individuals, often co-occurring with **(B)** splits, and **(C)** compacting, emerging form individual level-turns. The trajectories and timeseries of nearest neighbour distance (m) shown in (C) are exported by the model at the end of a simulation (N = 200). Altitude varies along the y-axis. From diving manoeuvres, **(D)** columnar flocking and **(E)** the cordon emerge, similarly to what is observed in flocks of starlings pursued by the Robot-Falcon. The red arrows in (D) indicate the position and orientation of the RobotFalcon and predoid (attacking a flock of 500 sturnoids). **(F)** The 3D coordinates of a flock (N = 200) during escape by diving. The colour represents the distance of each individuals to the centre of the flock as exported by the model.

Hysteresis

Expansion and compression of flocks in our model emerged through hysteresis: during a collective turn the flock often became denser which induced a subsequent decrease in density through repulsion forces among individuals right after the evasion (Fig. 4A-C). This emerges for a single parameter set of attraction, alignment, and avoidance (coordination) before and after the turn (Fig. 4B). The dynamics of this initial compacting may be linked to the differences in the initiation of turning across group members (supplementary Fig. S7). When some sturnoids start turning inwards, in relation to the flock's centroid, they decrease their nearest neighbour distance, leading to more avoidance interactions after.

The pattern of dilution in our model also emerged by hysteresis. It occurred as a side-effect of flock-members decreasing their reaction frequency when switching from alarmed flocking to regular flocking when the predoid retreated (supplementary Vid. S5). Just from this decrease in coordination frequency, and with a denser flock pre-existing, the flock dilutes, taking a shape that differed from its shape at the initial condition before the predator's attack (Fig. 4D). This matches the empirical observation that starling flocks dilute when they move away from the predator (Fig. 4D, supplementary Vid. S5).

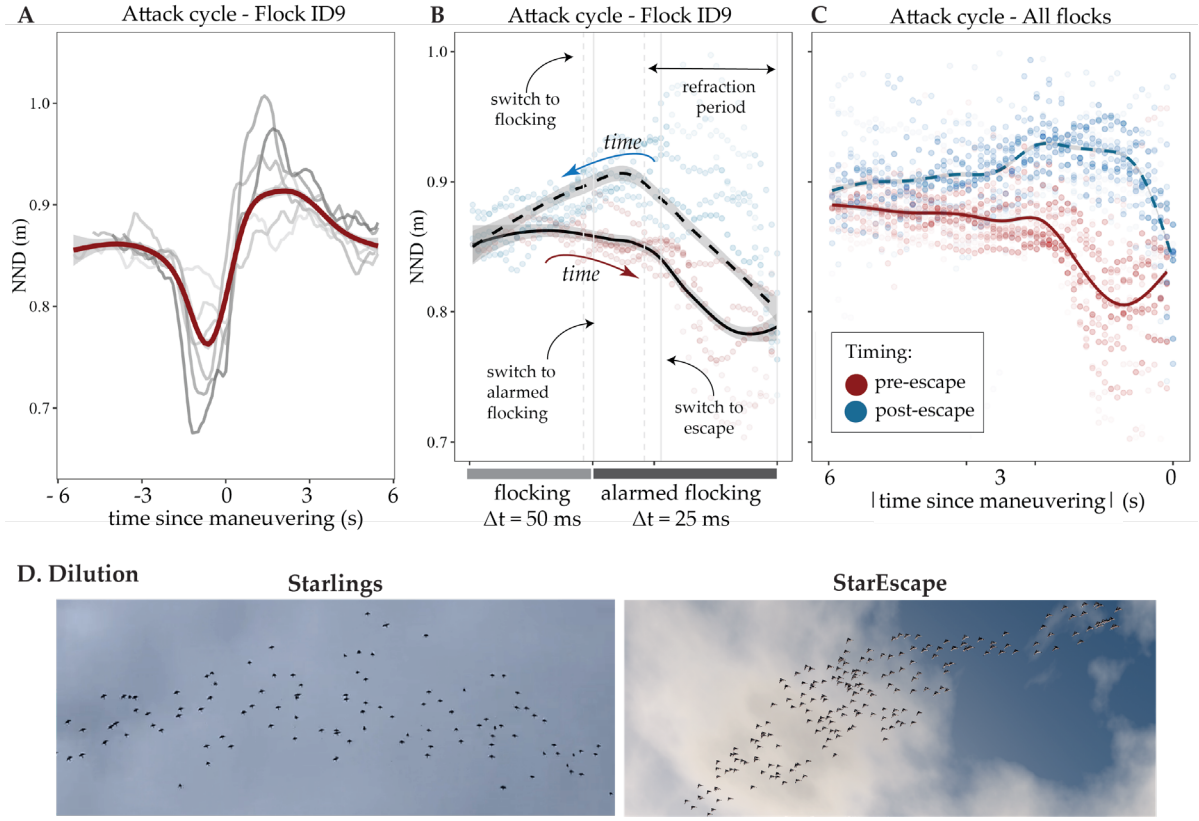

Figure 4. Hysteresis in collective escape. (A) Average nearest neighbour distance (NND) during an attack cycle of a simulated flock. Time 0 is the end of a turning escape manoeuvre by all flock members. Grey lines show the time series of average NND during individual collective turns across the pursuit sequence. **(B-C)** The time series over absolute time relative to the end of an escape manoeuvre. The solid lines mark the decrease in NND as flock members transition from regular to alarmed flocking (decreasing their reaction time from 50 to 20 ms), and then start performing an escape manoeuvre ('pre-escape' period). The dashed lines show the return to regular flocking (post-escape), during which flock members have the same reaction frequency but higher NND as a result of the previous compacted state of the flock. The points show the average NND of a flock at each given point in an attack cycle. The vertical solid and dashed lines in (B) indicate the points that all group members have switched to a given state. **(D)** The pattern of dilution emerges when individuals decrease their reaction frequency (switching from alarmed flocking to flocking) after the predator's attack. Examples of dilution at the end of pursuits are also given in supplementary Vid. S3 and S5.

Discussion

The first model of collective escape in swarms, namely fish schools, was published more than 20 years ago[29], but the complexity of the collective escape of starlings still makes their understanding particularly challenging. By combining empirical data and our new computational model, we show that the diversity of aerial displays of starlings under predation may arise from a combination of (1) a few individuals starting to perform an escape manoeuvre, (2) the speed with which this information transfers through the flock, (3) the local condition of each flock member (i.e., its position in the flock and its relative position to the predator) that determines its exact reaction, and (4) the relation between patterns (group shape and density) through time, i.e., hysteresis. Protocols for data collection in future studies should thus focus on those elements.

How the geometry of a group, that influences many effects of self-organization such as information propagation and hysteresis, affects its collective escape or decision-making[43] has rarely been studied. An example of this is the columnar flocking we observed here. While the flock is columnar rather than spherical, the large differences in the relative position of individuals to the predator and the increased distance of all group members to the centre of the flock (Fig. 3F) cause turning information to take longer to propagate from one edge of the flock to the other[44]. As a consequence, when collective turns co-occur with columnar flocking, a cordon or a split may emerge, depending on the position and angular velocity of the escape initiator[18]. The cordon tends to also lead to the split, since the two large parts of the flock experience different threat levels because of their different relative positions to the predator. It is interesting to note that the expected hunting strategy of predators of attacking the less dense part of a group (which during this formation is the cordon) to decrease confusion effects[39,45,46], also enhances splitting, which may further benefit the predator[47].

The specifics of escape manoeuvres, information transfer, and local conditions we uncover here are valuable to also understand the emergence of other collective patterns of starlings, such as the agitation wave[16,48], the flash expansion[8,17] and the

vacuole[8]. The agitation wave can emerge from a zig-zag manoeuvre: individuals sequentially turning slightly to the left and then to the right (or vice-versa)[13]. Concerning the specifics of information transfer, previous work on agitation waves showed that more realistic waves (damping) emerge if individuals copy their neighbours' manoeuvre with the same probability, but perform a less extreme manoeuvre (i.e., reduced banking) when they are further away from the predator[14]. 'Vertical' compacting in starlings, a fast compression of the flock from the top that is not yet understood, may emerge from a similar mechanism: the reduced copying of a diving manoeuvre and the predator attacking the flock from the top. Understanding such propagation mechanisms is also important for wave propagation in other systems (e.g., sulphur mollies, *Poecilia sulphuraria*, under attack by avian predators[49,50]). The flash expansion can emerge from a fast turning manoeuvre away from the predator[17,51]. According to both our empirical observations and previous findings in beetles[51], the flash expansion is a localized pattern, emerging as a direct response away from the position of the predator when the predator attacks at high speed and gets dangerously close to some individuals at the edge of a large flock. The vacuole, a rare pattern seen only in very large flocks of starlings, is more common in fish schools (perhaps because of the lower manoeuvrability of their predators [15,29,30]). It is characterized by some individuals being close to the predator without trying to escape. This may be due to the safety-in-numbers effect (risk dilution[52]): the risk of an individual being caught is low in a large flock, so it may have a higher tendency to stay in the group and save energetic costs of manoeuvring until the threat is too high. To better understand the emergence of more complex aerial displays, detailed information about escape reactions of prey individuals in relation to the predator's position and speed[53–59], as well as their flock mates' reactions, is necessary.

Our results further highlight that hysteresis may be crucial in the emergence of complex aerial displays. In collective motion of fish-like agents, a single parameter combination is shown to lead to both milling and polarized motion, depending on whether the behaviour of the group before was ordered or disordered[21]. We showed that a single parameter combination can lead to both a spherical compacted flock, and a wide, diluted flock (lower density), depending on whether the flock has been compacted or loose before. In self-assembling army ants, hysteresis has been identified when the gap that their bridge is covering is decreasing, with more individuals composing a bridge over the same distance than when the gap was increasing[36]. In starlings, the effect of hysteresis we identified also relates to the fast sequence of 'unstable' states of the flock during the whole sequence of a pursuit, while the flock transitions from noticing a predator, to escaping, and relaxing after the predator retreats. This temporal aspect of hysteresis ('short-term' hysteresis) has to our best knowledge not been studied previously and may play a crucial role in the emergence of many spatiotemporal patterns, emphasizing the importance of considering long behavioural sequences in studies of collective escape.

At the individual level, one aspect of behaviour that is affected by the presence of the predator is the specifics of social interactions among prey, as known for fish schools[40]. However, changes in the vigilance level of individuals, captured in agent-based models by the update or reaction frequency of each group member, has also been shown to lead to fast accelerations[60] (as identified in empirical data[40]) and changes in the internal structure of the group (diffusion)[23], without changes in the actual rules of social interactions. Our *StarEscape* simulations show that changes in the reaction frequency of group members may also underlie an emergent decrease in density, in line with what was expected to arise from the selfish herd hypothesis[3,52], but without an explicit increase in the tendency of individuals to move towards the centre of their flock. This highlights the importance of considering such fine-scale effects of self-organization when interpreting collective phenomena.

Most of our current understanding of how patterns of collective escape emerge comes from computational models of fish schools[29,30,61]. However, there are large differences between the locomotion type and evasive manoeuvres of fish and birds, and in the internal structure of their swarms[26,62]. Detailed investigation on how rules of interaction and escape 'translate' across systems is essential before we can establish universal mechanisms of collective escape. It is therefore unresolved whether similar collective escape patterns in fish[29–31] and starlings are generated by the same mechanism. Another limiting aspect of most existing models for studying starling flocks is their 2-dimensions. The importance of studying their flocks in 3-dimensions is apparent in our empirical data: by combining footage from the ground camera and the RobotFalcon we observe that the co-occurrence of compacting with collective turns may also be an effect of the observer's orientation (supplementary Fig. S1)[13,31] .

StarEscape is a valuable tool to study the complex aerial displays of bird flocks in more detail, given also its user interface (supplementary Fig. S9), simulation speed, detailed output, and flexible structure facilitating future development. Further model functionalities are mentioned in our *Supporting Information Text*. A limiting aspect is the difficulty to investigate the emergence of different collective patterns across the parameter space of our model. To overcome this constraint, automated identification of the different patterns should be developed, i.e., a quantitative definition of each type of collective escape, similar to distance-based thresholds used for splitting in pigeons[18] and proxy metrics used to study patterns of collective motion such as turning[23] and milling[24]. Apart from this process-oriented investigation, a function-oriented analysis in our model can show the adaptive advantages of different patterns, how they affect the catching success of the predator[46,61], or their dependence to individual heterogeneity in terms of escape reaction[63] (since selection pressures are expected to act on

such response parameters). *StarEscape* can further be adjusted to other bird species, such as dunlins[39], since the coloration and shape of agents in our model can be changed (see supplementary Vid. S6), allowing across species comparisons[31,62]. For instance, the 'rippling' effect that dunlin flocks demonstrate[39] may be the result of orientation waves similar to the ones of starlings[13,39]. Overall, a comparative approach over several patterns of collective escape in bird flocks can improve our understanding of starling murmurations, complex aerial displays in general, and the evolution of such extreme collective phenomena.

Methods

Empirical data and analysis

We qualitatively analysed video footage of 19 flocks of European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) pursued by our RobotFalcon[34,37]. The dataset was collected by Storms *et al.* (2022)[34] between February and November 2019 at agricultural sites in the north of the Netherlands (52°59'N- 5°27'E). The RobotFalcon approached flocks from a distance while the flock was on the ground and continued to an aerial pursuit when the flock took off, until it left the site. The RobotFalcon is a remotely controlled aerial predator that resembles a peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) in appearance and size. It is steered by a trained pilot, aiming to imitate the hunting behaviour of the real falcon. The pilot has a first-person view of the flock through a camera mounted on the back of the RobotFalcon.

In the footage retrieved from the ground camera, we identified the patterns of collective escape according to previous classifications[7,8], with the exception of the split. We identified a split when part of the flock formed a new cohesive flock, without taking into account splits of one or a few individuals (as a result of a flash expansion for instance, as done in previous work of small groups of 10-30 individuals)[18,28]. We further recorded whether in a single flock different patterns of collective behaviour were exhibited simultaneously. In detail, we analysed videos of approximately 15 minutes of pursuit by the RobotFalcon using the Adobe Premier Pro software. We factorized each video into a sequence of steps during which a new collective state is observed and kept only the flocks in which two collective patterns co-occurred in at least one step (N = 10). In addition, for each event of collective escape, we examined the motion of individual starlings, particularly focusing on changes in their heading and altitude. We further selected few visible individuals close to the point of attack of the RobotFalcon and tracked their motion. Footage from the RobotFalcon camera was used to compare the observed patterns from a different angle, when possible (supplementary Fig. S1). We used our observations to develop a computational model.

A computational model of collective escape

We built an agent-based model to simulate the collective escape of starlings (*StarEscape)*. The model is based on the principles of self-organization with two types of agents moving in an open 3-dimensional space: 'sturnoids' that coordinate with each other and 'predoids' that pursue and attack the sturnoid flocks. A detailed model description is given below, using elements of the ODD protocol[64]. The model is written in C++, using OpenGL for the real-time visualization of the simulation, and DearImGui for the graphic user interface (GUI, supplementary Fig. S9).

Model overview

All agents are defined by a position and a velocity vector in the global coordinate system. The heading of each agent defines its local coordinate system (Fig. 5A) through which an agent senses the position and heading of its interacting agents. Sturnoids have a set of nearest neighbours with which they interact (set $\mathbb{N}$) and predoids have a flock or a sturnoid as a target. According to empirical findings on starling flocks, we model topological interactions between individuals[9]. Each sturnoid interacts with its 7 closest neighbours (n^{topo}) that are within its field of view (θ_{FoV}) according to the rules of alignment, attraction and avoidance (*flocking sub-model*[64]).

Apart from their neighbours, sturnoids sense the position of the closest predoid and their 'alertness' (or 'stress') increases as they get close to it (Fig. 5B). Sturnoids react to the predoid with an evasive manoeuvre based on a probability that depends on their alertness (similar to decision-making processes in models of evidence accumulation in social systems[65]). The neighbours ($n^{topo}{}_{\text{copy}}$) of an escaping sturnoid copy its manoeuvre. A predoid first chooses a flock and follows it from a given point relative to its centre (based on the parameters β_{at} and d_{at}). From there, it picks its closest sturnoid as its target and attacks it. The attack has a specific duration (t_{hunt}) after which the predator gets re-positioned far away from the flock. Since we focus on the emergence of collective escape patterns, we do not model 'catches' of sturnoids by the predator.

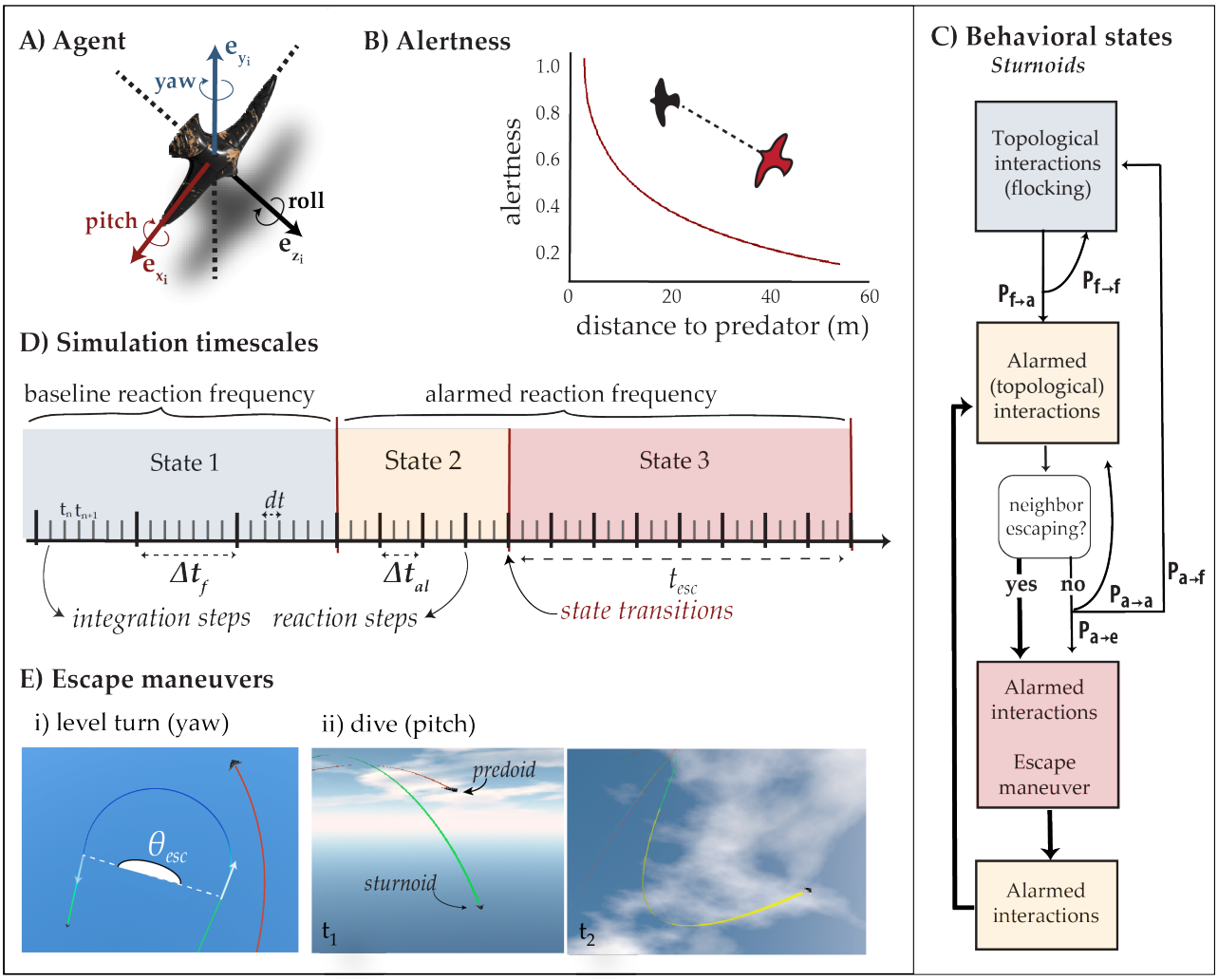

Figure 5. The StarEscape model. (A) The local coordinate system of an agent in the 3-dimensional space. The vectors e_x, e_z, and e_y represent the sideward, forward, and upward directions of the agent, respectively. The agent yaws and rolls to turn, and pitches to dive or climb. **(B)** Alertness increase. The alertness of each individual accumulates at each update timestep as a function of its distance to the predator. **(C)** The transition mechanism between behavioural states in sturnoids. The transition probabilities ($P_{x\text{->}x}$) represent the dynamic Markov-chain of each individual and thicker arrows represent deterministic transitions. In detail, sturnoids may transition from their regular coordination (with update frequency $1/\Delta t_f$) to an alarmed state if their alertness increases. During alarmed coordination, their coordination frequency ($1/\Delta t_a$) is increased and a sturnoid may perform an escape manoeuvre based on its probability to escape or copy the escape of its neighbours (transitioning to an escape state). Each escape has a predefined duration (t_{esc}), after which agents transition back to alarmed coordination without the option to perform an escape manoeuvre (refractory state). After this, they regain the probability to react to the predator and the cycle starts again. If alertness decreases, individuals transition back to regular coordination. The exact values of the Markov chain depend on each individual's alertness. We derive them by interpolating through 3 parameterized transition matrices for low, intermediate, and high alertness. The chain of the predoid is given in supplementary Fig. S8. **(D)** The timescales of StarEscape. At every integration step (t_n) individuals update their position and heading according to their steering force (with frequency $1/dt$). At every reaction step, individuals recalculate their steering force, representing the cognitive collection and processing of information from their environment (with frequency $1/\Delta t$). At these time steps, each individual also decides whether to stay in its current state or switch, depending on its Markov-chain. **(E)** Screenshots of the escape manoeuvres of individual sturnoids in a simulation. Sturnoids escape the predator by two evasive motions, (i) a level turn (with angular change θ_{esc}) or (ii) a dive (t_1, after which they return to level flight, t_2). The blue and green tracks show the sturnoids' trajectories during escape, the red tracks show the predoid's trajectories, and the yellow track the refractory period and pitch recovery after the diving manoeuvre.

Behavioural states

The individual-level rules of motion and interaction in our model depend on the 'state' of each agent. For sturnoids, we define 3 behavioural states: a coordination state, an alarmed-coordination state, and an escaping state (Fig. 5C). An individual-based non-homogeneous Markov Chain controls the transition from one state to another. The transition probabilities depend on the alertness of each individual at each timestep, which depends on its distance to the predator. When a sturnoid is close to the predator, its alertness increases every time it updates its information about the predator's position, according to a given function (see section 'Escape' and Fig. 5B), and decays with a constant rate (r_{decay}). The increase and decay of

alertness is balanced for alertness to always increase when the predator is close and decrease back to 0 within a few seconds after the predator retreats. From this mechanism, individuals switch to alarmed coordination (higher reaction frequency) when the predator starts pursuing the flock, spontaneously escape (depending on alertness) when it gets close, and return to their basic coordination when the predator stops its pursuit.

During coordination, group members align with, are attracted to, and avoid each other (for details see section 'Coordination'). Sturnoids are also attracted to their roost and to a given altitude (see section 'Physics of motion'). During alarmed coordination, individuals coordinate with each other more often (higher reaction frequency, Δt_a), according to empirical evidence that prey individuals have faster reactions under predation (more frequent interactions with neighbours)[40,60]. When alarmed, individuals may switch to an escape state. This switch is either an individual 'decision' (based on the probability of their Markov chain) or induced by an escaping neighbour; individuals copy the escape reactions of their neighbours. During escape, sturnoids perform an evasive manoeuvre while coordinating, with the relative influence of each term (e.g., alignment, attraction, turn away) being controlled by their relative weights. After escaping, individuals return to an alarmed-coordination state without the possibility to escape for a specific period of time (conceptualized as a refractory period, t_{ref}). This chain of behavioural states and its transitions are given in Fig. 5C.

The predoid in our simulation has 3 behavioural states. First, it perceives the largest flock (in case a split has occurred) and positions behind it at a given distance (d_{at}) and bearing angle (on the horizontal and vertical plane, β_{at}) from the flock's centre and velocity, adopting its heading (*preparation state*). Second, it follows the flock ('shadowing') or locks into its closest sturnoid and moves towards it, with a speed that scales from the target's speed (u_{scale}, e.g., 1.3 times faster than the sturnoid; *attack state*). Third, after the attack duration has passed (t_{hunt}), the predator repositions away from the flock for a given time period (*retreat state,* $t_{retreat}$). The cycle then repeats, and a new attack takes place. Thus, all the states of the predoid (see supplementary Fig. S8) have predefined durations, like the refractory period of sturnoids and opposite to the rest of the sturnoids' states that spontaneously alternate.

We further describe the sub-modules of each state below. To better understand their specifics, we first explain the behavioural timescales in our model and how individual motion is controlled.

Timing

In the model, time is measured in seconds according to a parameter that scales a time step of the model to the real units of time (*dt)*. We use two timescales, the 'integration step' and the 'reaction step'. A single time step (*dt* seconds) is an 'integration' step. Since individuals cannot instantaneously receive, process, and react to information about their environment, we define as 'reaction step' the frequency with which individuals update their information about their environment (neighbours and predator). Every reaction step consists of several integration steps, during which agents integrate the information they collected in the preceding reaction step by adjusting their position and heading (Fig. 5D). Since grouping individuals in nature are not perfectly synchronized, individuals in the model update their information asynchronously (at different integration steps) but with the same frequency. During a reaction step, individuals may also switch state as described above.

'Physics' of motion

Individuals are steered in the global space by a pseudo-force (referred to as 'steering force'): a 3-dimensional vector that pushes individuals to their future position and heading. The steering force has 4 components: 1) a coordination force, 2) an escape force (for sturnoids) and a hunting force (for predoids), 3) a control force, and 4) a drag force. Large values in the forward direction (z) of the steering force will make individuals accelerate, towards the side (x) will make them turn, and in the vertical direction (y) will make them change altitude (dive or climb). The steering force is calculated at each reaction step and applied at each integration step to determine the new position and heading of each agent. Details about the drag and control force are given in the *Supporting Information Text.*

Coordination

The specifics of coordination affect the motion of a sturnoid continuously. Attraction pulls each individual towards the centre of its neighbourhood ($n^{topo}{}_{coh}$). The strength of this force depends on the individual's distance to that centre: the further away a sturnoid is from its neighbours' centroid, the stronger the force is. Alignment turns an individual towards the average heading of its neighbours ($n^{topo}{}_{ali}$). Avoidance makes the individual turn away from the position of its closest neighbour, if the neighbour is within a range of minimum separation (d_s). We parameterize each sturnoid to avoid only its closest neighbour (instead of their n^{topo} closest neighbours) for the diffusion of flock members in our simulations to resemble more empirical data of starlings[22]. Noise to each individual's motion is also added through a pseudo-force perpendicular to its heading with magnitude sampled from a uniform distribution with bounds $-w_n$ and w_n (weighting factor for random noise).

Escape

At every reaction step, the alertness of an individual accumulates according to the function $w_{stress} * e^{-\frac{\sqrt{d_i^p}}{\sigma_s}}$ (with d_i^p being the distance between the focal individual i and the predator, σ_s a scaling parameter, and w_{stress} the weighting factor for stress accumulation), and at every integration step it decays (with rate r_{decay}). The higher an individual's alertness is, the higher its probability of performing an escape manoeuvre. A set of probabilities assigned to each manoeuvre controls which evasive action the individual will perform. We investigate two manoeuvres in our model: a level turn and a dive (Fig. 5E). During turns, individuals make a turn of θ_{esc} degrees (here $\simeq 180^o$) away from the predator (depending on their own heading relative to the predator's heading). During dives, individuals pitch downwards depending on their own distance to the predator (the closer the predator the steeper the dive). This distance dependency is controlled by a smootherstep function:

$$\psi_i^{dive} = w_d\,(-1 + \begin{cases} 0), & if\ d_i^p = 0 \\ 6x^5 - 15x^4 + 10x^3), & if\ 0 < d_i^p \leq \sigma_d \\ 1), & if\ \sigma_d < d_i^p \end{cases} \qquad \textit{Dive maneuver (1)}$$

where $x = \frac{d_i^p}{\sigma_d}$, w_d is the weighting factor for diving, and σ_d the smoothing parameter that denotes the minimum distance from the predator for a sturnoid to dive. When an individual exceeds a maximum dive distance (d_d), it starts pitching upwards to get to its preferred altitude. Note that during copying, an individual copies the type of escape manoeuvre from its neighbour (turn or dive), but bases the specifics of the manoeuvre on its own local conditions (relative position and heading to the predator). The topological range for copying ($n^{topo}{}_{copy}$) is set to the same value as for coordination.

Initialization, model validation, data collection, and experiments

Our simulations include a single predoid and many sturnoids (N <=5000). Sturnoids are initialized in a flocking formation: with a small heading deviation around a given global heading and positioned within a radius around a given point in space. This resembles the starting conditions of the starling flocks in our empirical experiment. The predator is initialized a few seconds after the flock and immediately enters its preparation state (positioned behind the flock with the same heading as its target). All parameter values (supplementary Table S1) are given to the compiled model through a configuration file (*.json*) at run time (for the selection of the default values see our Supporting Information Text). We focus our analysis on which patterns emerge across simulations. A camera that follows the flock (with a certain flock member as its centre) shows the simulation in real time. The user can move the orientation of the camera to look at the flock from a different perspective (see supplementary Fig. S9 and Vid. S7).

First, we collected screenshots and recordings of the emerging patterns of collective escape across simulations. We compare these observations with the empirical, qualitative data of starlings' collective escape (video recordings). Second, we analysed a number of measurements computed by the model in real time and exported at the end of each simulation (for details see our *Supporting Information Text*). The available quantitative data of starling flocks are very limited, constraining comparisons of our model across many characteristics of starling flocks. However, to validate our model, we compared the average speed, nearest neighbour distance and stability of neighbours (based on the 4 and 6 closest ones, measured as in [2,22,23]) of our simulated flocks (N = 50-1000) with previously published empirical results from starlings in Rome[2,10,11]. This pattern-oriented approach[35] has been shown to successfully accomplish the resemblance of simulated flocks to the target species in comparisons over a dozen metrics of collective motion[27,66]. We further investigated the dynamics of group density during collective escape, using trajectories from 20 simulations with 90 second pursuits (according to the average pursuit duration of the RobotFalcon) on flocks of 100-200 individuals. Further data analysis and visualization was performed in R.

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Data and code availability

The StarEscape model will be available on a GitHub repository and the version used to reproduce the data presented here will be archived on a Zenodo repository. All simulated data and further code to analyse the data exported by the model as used here will also be available online upon publication.

Author contributions

MP, HH, and CKH conceptualized the study. RS collected the empirical data, supervised by CKH, CC and SV. MP and RS analysed the empirical data with input from CC, SV and CKH. MP and HH developed the computational model. MP designed the computational experiments, ran the simulations, analysed the simulated data, created all visualizations, and wrote the original manuscript. All authors provided feedback and revised the manuscript.

Competing interest statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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