

Crows

*If Men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them
would be clever enough to be crows.*

—THE REVEREND HENRY WARD BEECHER

AS I PASS BY THE CROWS cawing and squawking and leaping about on the corner by Burger King, I imagine them engaged in some sort of illicit swap meet. One would shriek, leap in the air, and then float back down onto the curb. Another would cock its head and follow suit.

“I will trade you three French fries for a patch of fur from a golden retriever’s tail . . .”

“Throw in a shiny hairpin and a nickel, and you have a deal.”

Eventually they complete their business and light off together, rolling and tumbling with the wind, traveling past power lines and warehouses, still cawing back and forth until they reach the limits of my hearing.

American crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) are virtually ubiquitous on the urban landscape, and it is easy to pass them by as “just another bunch of crows.” However, if you stop to watch a group (known as a “murder”) for a few minutes you will find that they invariably are up to something interesting.



Birds of a Feather Flock Together . . . and with Us as Well

As scavengers, crows have enjoyed a long and highly successful (at least on their end of the bargain) association with humans dating back to time immemorial. The crow's close proximity to humans through the ages has made it a central character in the mythologies and fables of many societies throughout the world. The corvid family, of which crows are members, enjoyed special protection in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due to the role they played cleansing medieval cities of putrid meat and other undesirable refuse that accumulated on city streets. Whereas many bird species have experienced stark declines in the face of urban and suburban growth, crows have realized their highest population densities in these landscapes where they are able to exploit our waste stream and prey upon other species made vulnerable by habitat fragmentation.

Crows are the ultimate social birds. Adults mate for life, and young from the prior nesting season will often remain with their parents through the first year of life to assist with raising the following year's clutch. The extended period that young crows spend with their parents is vital to learning many of the behaviors and social skills they will need to survive. In fact, of any bird found in the metropolitan landscape, crows typically spend the longest period of time with their parents after leaving the nest. Their cognitive ability has been compared with non-human primates and parrots, and they are one of the few animals that have demonstrated tool-making capabilities.

It is not uncommon for people to come across young crows shortly after they leave the nest and assume that they are in need of "rescuing." They are nearly full size when they fledge but often take several days to become fully airborne. Their large size and the active presence of their extended family make young crows highly conspicuous. In fact, many people mistake the loud and chaotic approaches and departures of a young crow's relatives for aggressive behavior, when in reality what is happening is that the extended family is providing the vulnerable youngster with



guidance and care. A sure sign of a young crow is light blue rather than black eyes. If you see young crows hopping about during the springtime with other crows flying about, enjoy them from a distance but please leave them alone.

In fall and winter, crows form massive communal roosts that can range in size from hundreds to thousands of birds. These flocks provide crows with protection from predators and also are believed to play a significant role in helping spread information about food sources. It can be a truly disconcerting, but amazing spectacle to suddenly see hundreds of crows descending upon an urban neighborhood as the sun is setting.

Mobbing

Crows often provide the first indication that a bird of prey is in the area. They will aggressively mob hawks and owls to drive them away. Listen for the sound of raucous cawing and watch for crows looping madly about a tree or telephone pole or building—you will frequently find a disheartened red-tailed hawk or great horned owl perched in their midst looking for its chance to escape the din. At Audubon's Wildlife Care Center, we always warn people who come out to watch rehabilitated birds of prey being released not to be surprised if crows seem to magically appear within seconds of the hawk's taking to the sky. I can recall many a quiet, peaceful morning when we gently released a raptor only to hear a distant "caw" followed quickly by several more "caws" as dozens of crows seemed to materialize out of thin air to give chase.

Interestingly, many people worry about the well-being of birds of prey when they observe crow-mobbing behavior. The fact is that the crows may present an annoyance, but they pose no real threat to the predators. However, turnabout is fair play. Urban conservationist Don Francis tells a great story about a crow harassing a red-tailed hawk sitting on a light post. The hawk eventually abandoned its perch and circled lazily upward with the crow following suit and cawing as it rose. Eventually both birds disappeared into the clouds. Several minutes later the crow drifted back down to the light post alone. Thinking the show was over, Don prepared to leave when suddenly the red-tail came screaming out of the sky and slammed into the crow without warning and proceeded to pluck and eat him on the spot.

Havoc

Perhaps Portland's most famous crow is a bird appropriately dubbed Havoc. Havoc was discovered in downtown Portland, where he spent his days drinking out of the Benson bubblers, dodging traffic, and barking at blonde women. He apparently had been illegally raised as a pet and then set free. Eventually his antics resulted in his capture and delivery to Audubon's Wildlife Care Center, where he immediately released himself from the confines of the pet carrier in which he found himself imprisoned, flew to the nearest sink, turned on the faucet, and had himself a nice, long, cool drink. Once satiated, he turned to the assembled staff and volunteers, gave three high-pitched barks—"whoop, whoop, whoop"—and bowed.

Havoc lived at Audubon's Care Center for a year, during which he served as an education bird, teaching kids about the importance of keeping wild animals wild. With a penchant for blondes, baths, mice, and mealworms, he quickly became a favorite of the general public. However, he hated captivity. He would greet us each morning by springing up and down in his cage like some manic, feathered pogo stick. Failure to satiate his ever-changing desires quickly resulted in what only can be described as a vindictive temper tantrum, a full-fledged squawking, shrieking, food flying, ankle pecking, crow freak-out. His tastes were expensive too—one day I turned to find him removing the prism from a five hundred dollar ophthalmoscope.

He was sent for a short time to live at Oregon State University, where he participated in a study of captive crows. The professor in charge arranged for a cohort of blonde coeds to visit Havoc on a daily basis to keep him reasonably entertained. Eventually Havoc was set free on a property at the edge of the urban growth boundary, where the neighbors were apprised and accepting of a somewhat odd bird. He spent many months in the vicinity perfecting the art of pushing azalea pots off porches and showing up uninvited at local barbecues.

One day Havoc was sighted keeping company with other crows. However when the flock left to roost, Havoc was left behind, apparently absorbed in watching a man fly his model airplane in the field below. As time wore on, his interactions with the flock increased. The last known Havoc sighting was at a local school. A man working in the school basement turned to find Havoc barking at him from the window well. That was just around sunset. The next morning the flock had moved on and Havoc was nowhere to be found.

Egg Sucking Crow and Gator Gull

Nowhere is the crow's ability to exploit the urban landscape better exemplified than on the rusty, creaky ramparts of the Interstate Bridge. I came to know the Egg-Sucking Crow and his aquatic counterpart, Gator Gull, when I was monitoring

Ravens

People often confuse crows and ravens. While American crows are common in the Portland-Vancouver Region and across western Oregon, common ravens tend to be found at higher elevations toward the Coast Range and the Cascades. However, the occasional raven does make its way through the metro region, so sightings are possible. Ravens are significantly larger than crows. Their call is typically a much lower, guttural, croaking "quork" as opposed to the crow's more nasal "caw." The raven's tail is wedge-shaped while the crow's is fanned. Up close the raven's beak is huge relative to its head and curves downward while the crow's beak is more dainty and pointed. Crows and ravens are both members of the corvid family. Other members of this family found in Portland include western scrub-jays, which are common throughout our urban neighborhoods, and Steller's jays which frequent heavily forested areas such as Forest Park.

peregrines that nest high atop the bridge. The bridge is actually home to a motley assortment of creatures that eke out an existence in the shadow of the falcons, death from above. The dominant denizens of the bridge are rock pigeons that nest in the nooks and crannies and hundreds of thousands of starlings that roost in virtually every spot not occupied by a pigeon. The first time I monitored at this site, I was suddenly surprised by an early evening rain shower, only to subsequently realize that in fact the bridge was actually awash in bird excrement from the massive clouds of birds undulating overhead. Peregrines ripped through the flocks picking off prey at will.

Two particular birds, however, for years have managed to survive on the bridge without presenting themselves as peregrine prey. Gator Gull is actually a glaucous-winged gull that earned his name by abandoning traditional gull food fare for squab. He sits low in the water beneath the bridge and casually approaches the unsuspecting pigeons that come to the edge of the cement footings to drink from the river. In a flash he grabs them by their necks and drags them into the water. The struggle ends quickly, and he plucks and consumes his prey as he floats safely on the water. He rarely is seen taking to the air.

High above, a crow also appears to have developed some interesting and perhaps unique survival skills. Sit still for an extended period on the bridge and there is a very good chance Egg-Sucking Crow will hobble by. I have never seen him fly. Instead he wanders about the erector set-like bridge structure on foot, robbing eggs from pigeon nests. He pops quickly in and out of holes in the steel bridge framework. Sometimes he comes out empty-handed. Other times he is preceded by a flush of pigeons. Invariably he eventually emerges with an egg in his beak. I have watching him carry an egg around with him in his beak for extended periods of time, occasionally appearing to swallow it, only to pop it back up, like a little kid pretending to eat his vegetables. I know it is anthropomorphizing, but he always looks guilty, up to something. I imagine Egg-Sucking Crow and Gator Gull as elderly birds chuckling over the ways they tricked Peregrine.

Sunset

Take some time at sunset, as the landscape grows quiet to listen for crows. In the springtime listen for the gurgling “gug, gug, gug” sound of young being fed, and see if you can figure out where they are nesting. Then you can observe the complex interactions of the extended family caring for this year’s brood. In the fall, look for black silhouettes crossing the sky, cawing as they converge on a communal roost. Common creatures, yes, but also incredibly complex and fascinating.

By Bob Sallinger, illustration by Virginia Church