

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

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### THOSE BLACK CROWS

If a person knows only four birds, one of them will be the crow. That is the opinion of a famous authority upon birds. Few of us would disagree with his pronouncement for what bird is more widespread, or better known than the big black bird that goes caw, caw; whose lusty clamor means, "Spring is here", to thousands of people, but proclaims, "Danger to the cornfield", and a chance at a shot to myriads of farmers' boys. In the cities, on the land, throughout the forests and along the beaches, everywhere you will find the crow. "From sea to sea", reads Canada's motto, and the crow takes it seriously. From Cape Breton to Vancouver Island he may be found, in every province of this dominion.

When we consider that white men began pointing their guns at crows almost as soon as the first pioneers landed on the shores of North America we may well ask how could any bird withstand such persistent persecution as has been meted out to this species since that time. The question becomes all the more puzzling when we realize that crows are doubtless now many times more numerous than when the colonists first began to shoot them out of their cornfields.

The answer, I believe, is twofold. Partly it is to be found in the fact that whereas man persecuted the crow at one moment he offered him bounty at the next. Not willingly of course. But men had to clear the land and cultivate it, had to remove forests and create farms in order to live. Such an alteration from wild country to farmland was very hard upon many birds and animals but for others, -- and amongst these the crow is outstanding -- it was a golden opportunity. For this raucous black fellow there was far more food, far more easily to be had in the tame rural areas than in the wild bush. He thrived, grew ever more numerous; jeered at the toiling farmer from a perch on his ridiculous scarecrow, and spread far and wide.

The other part of the answer was summed up by Henry Ward Beecher the well-known American preacher, when he said, "If men wore feathers and wings a very few of them would be clever enough to be Crows!"

Long has the battle raged, and it still rages, between the experts over the problem of animal intelligence. But few who have had much close contact with crows, and their close relatives -- ravens, magpies, and jays -- will have much doubt that this group of birds has a right to its reputation as the most intelligent section of our birds. Nor will the crow yield the palm to any of its relatives. Beecher's imputing of superb cleverness to the crow will be accepted by nearly all, even of cleverness beyond that of men, for has not Corvus increased and spread when men everywhere were against him.

The stories of the crow's success in the war with man are legion. His ability to distinguish between scarecrows, even the flapping kind, and real humans is common knowledge. That these birds post sentries when a flock is feeding in a grainfield, or at some other choice spot, is well attested. Let anyone who does not credit this try to approach such a flock and see how fast the sentries will raise the alarm, sending every feeding bird hastening to a safe distance. There are many variations of the experience reported by one man. He was able to walk up under a tree in which a crow was sitting whilst he had a fishing rod in his hand but when he tried to approach the same bird with a gun in his hand he was unable to get within gunshot. That some of these stories are exaggerations, and some only reports of coincidences there can be no doubt; neither can we doubt that many of them are accounts of true experiences. Somehow most crows have developed a way of knowing when men approach them with malice aforethought and when they are merely harmless passersby.

Men's traps have as a rule as little success as shooting. Crows easily learn to recognize traps and to stay clear of them. Poisoned chunks of meat, carcasses of animals like rabbits, have been often placed in fields frequented by crows but after a few of the birds were poisoned the others learned to avoid such baits. Poisoned fruits or nuts have been offered in orchards that were much molested, and though the observation of members of the flock, dying from eating such food, has succeeded in causing the flocks to retreat to other parts not many crows were killed. As one report has it, "the actual number of crows poisoned was extremely small, not exceeding 1% of the flock."

Crows are, however, vulnerable to attack by man in their night roosts. It is customary for these birds to congregate in great roosts at night after the breeding season is over, probably for mutual protection against such enemies as owls. But the practice has enabled men in recent years to slaughter them in huge numbers, especially in the huge winter roosts in the southern and mid-western United States. Several such instances are reported in the recently issued Life Histories of North American Jays, Crows, and Titmice, (ed. A.C.Bent). One example of this method of attacking crows took place, we are told, in Texas on April 7, 1937. "Bombs were exposed in a shinnery clump to kill crows. There was one stick of dynamite to each bomb, and the bombs were connected with wires, so that they could be fired simultaneously. Sixty bombs were set off at the first discharge, at which it was estimated that 40,000 crows were killed; at the second shot, 120 bombs were set off, killing nearly as many more." A similar use of "festoons of dynamite bombs" resulted in the killing of 328,000 crows in roosts near Rockford, Illinois, in 1940. Whether such wholesale slaughter will result permanently in a great reduction

of the numbers of crows has yet to be seen. Whether this intelligent bird will develop some new living habits to protect itself against such super-modern persecution has also to be determined.

It should be pointed out that many of the crows killed during the winters by such operations as described above will be birds that normally would be summer breeders in Canada's prairie provinces. The usual Canadian reaction, at least in the prairie provinces, to such slaughter is one of relief that an effectual means has been found of reducing the crows. The prairie attitude to crows was strongly expressed by Mr. Frank L. Farley of Edmonton in a letter to A.C. Bent in 1932 when he pointed out that crows has so increased in central Alberta as to become a serious menace to waterfowl. This was because crows systematically robbed the ducks' nests of both eggs and young birds.

There is no question that crows do reach such numbers in parts of the west as to be highly dangerous to crops and to other bird life. In Eastern America, despite the common occurrence of the crow, concentrated damage of such proportions is very rare. Careful investigations of the crow's eating habits in this area have concluded consistently with statements that the harm done to crops, birds, animals, and other things is just about balanced by the good done in the form of consuming noxious insects, worms, weed seeds, and carrion. There can, therefore, be no strong argument for wholesale slaughter of crows in the east. And, even in the west, it would seem to be primarily a matter of control and reduction rather than extermination.

Whether the crow's intelligence is equal to the test of wholesale bombing and poisoning has yet to be told but in every other way it stands out. One of the most striking instances is the way in which the crow has adapted itself to city life. Few people realize how frequently crows' nests are to be seen in city parks, in shade trees along busy city streets. The arrival of the crows that live on the campus of the University of Toronto raises this point in my mind each year. I well remember their 1944 nest, a particularly good example of urban adaptation. The first bird arrived on February 29th that year, its mate some days later. They were soon busy making love, and testing possible nesting sites. On April 3rd, I saw a crow, probably the female, carrying nesting material over one of the University buildings, its mate, presumably the male, in silent attendance, carrying nothing. To my astonishment they were going away from the quiet, green spaces of the campus towards a busy, built-up area. Two days later I discovered the nest in an elm tree, some 40 or 50 feet above the ground, on St. George Street. I thought it a little strange that the crows should prefer this nesting site, above some of Toronto's heaviest traffic, to a quiet tree on the campus. But I decided that the very public nature of the site would in fact make it less likely to notice by people. And the constant flow of traffic on this busy thoroughfare would protect the crows from such predators as cats, hawks, and owls; not to speak of malicious humans, from boys with airguns if no worse. This pair of crows was exhibiting the shrewd intelligence that has contributed so much to the prosperity of their kind.

With enemies like hawks and owls the crows have their own methods of dealing. They use mob tactics, gang attack. Heaven help any hapless owl discovered on its daytime perch by some passing crow. The crow will stop anything he is doing, or intending to do, and will set up such a racket, a very special racket, that all the black brethren for a mile or more around will come rushing to get in on the excitement. Pretty soon a crowd of shrieking, shouting, jabbering, cursing black fellows will be raising a frightful hubbub around the wretched owl. Indeed it is by listening for just such "caw-cusses" that bird watchers find out where many owls are. Few of the black horde will dare to come close enough to be raked by the owl's talons, but they will perch just out of their victim's reach, and will stay for hours, if the owl can stand it, hurling epithets in the most obscene of corvine language. Should the owl get tired of such harassing, and it usually does, and take wing, the fiendish uproar which greets its departure is earsplitting. A listener knows where the owl has flown by this sudden explosion even if he hasn't seen any of the birds involved. The crow flock will trail after the owl, and pursue it until well out of their territory. The owl, however, especially if a great horned owl, may easily get even with his persecutors when night has fallen. For then, if he knows of the crows' roost, he can easily pick a victim off in the dark without the flock being able to do anything about it, or even being aware of what is occurring. Such conflict of bird with bird is really only a part of the normal balance of nature.

The number of crows that may be around becomes evident in such assemblages as we have just described, in the night roosts, and in the migratory flights. Crows are not as truly migratory as most of our birds but they do withdraw from the northernmost parts of their breeding range in the fall, and return to it in the spring. This means, in fact from most of Canada, though some crows stay all winter throughout southern Canada from coast to coast. Such winterers usually cling closely to the neighborhood of open water or to garbage dumps, where food is plentiful. The bulk of Canada's crows, however, move just far enough south to be free of snow. This may take them as far as the Gulf of Mexico, or it may be only to the cornfields of the Ohio Valley, depending upon the season. I have noticed on trips to Chicago from Toronto that crows become common in winter usually near the Indiana-Michigan border.

The migratory flights take place usually in October, and again in March, in the Toronto region. At times they reach tremendous proportions. On October 14, 1945, I saw one such flight that surpassed all my previous experiences, and which could be compared reasonably with one of the oldtime passenger pigeon flights. It occurred a mile or so beyond the De Haviland Airport on York Downs, north of Toronto. Whilst driving north one could see ahead untold quantities of crows dotted against the clouds. When we reached the path of the flight we stopped and got out. It was an incredible sight. Crows we think of as commonplace, but the commonplace when multiplied to such an extent becomes the extraordinary thing. Quite literally, the sky was covered from horizon to horizon with a moving ribbon of black dots, from half a mile to a mile in width. At a most conservative estimate between 3,000 and 4,000 crows were in

sight at one time. Considering that this migration was proceeding at a good speed, possibly 25 to 30 miles an hour, and that it continued throughout most of the day, the numbers involved must have reached an almost astronomical total. Flights of such extent are very rare in the east, but doubtless occur with some regularity in the Mississippi valley region. This particular flight may well have included the greater part of those crows that had bred in eastern Ontario and western Quebec.

Crows are not always at a distance, or always wary of man. If captured young enough they make extremely interesting pets, though like all members of the crow-jay group, such birds as pets are likely to be cleverly mischievous. Any small object, especially if colorful or bright, is certain to attract their attention. They will carry anything like this off to some secret hiding place. Their treasure troves sometimes become great accumulations before being discovered. Often they are never found. E.H. Forbush in his Birds of Massachusetts gives a most amusing summary of the petty thievery and other tricks of pet crows that has come to his attention. He says, "Among others was the tale of a country grocer who, making his rounds, was surprised to find every paper package in his wagon torn open and all the eggs broken. As this occurred repeatedly at a particular place, he watched, and learned that as soon as his back was turned two tame Crows made free with the contents of the wagon. Another young Crow delighted in pilfering its master's pipes and hiding them in the woodpile. One day in want of a better occupation this bird pulled up the young plants in the garden beds and laid them all out carefully along the rows in excellent order. Another enjoyed backing a small child up against a fence while pecking at the buttons on its shoes; still another delighted to peck at the bare legs of children. One seemed to think it a great joke to wait at a gap in a fence until a little fox terrier came through the opening, when the expectant Corvus pecked the frisky pup strongly on the nose, and at once flapped up to the top of a grape arbor, dancing about as if in great ecstasy at the success of the joke. It followed its master when he was at work in the garden, picked up all the worms that were unearthed, dug a hole and buried them, but seemed not to understand why they were not there when he returned to the hole with more worms. One young pet Crow was extremely fond of eggs, and soon learned that when a hen cackled she was advertising her wares; so as fast as the eggs were laid, they were wafted away by the sable bird."

Another ability that makes crows attractive pets is their power of imitating sounds. Curiously enough the crow, whose normal vocal efforts are limited to a variety of raucous, unmelodious sounds, is fully endowed with the physical apparatus for singing. Why it is not a first class songster is a real mystery. What it can do is proven by the manner in which captive crows are able to learn to produce innumerable kinds of notes and noises through imitation. Again the stories of such corvine accomplishments are legion. One of the best, a well-authenticated story, is Mr. Forbush's account of a man who "had a Crow that became quite proficient in the use of English. 'Brother Tom,' wrote Forbush's correspondent, 'sometimes overslept; when this happened our honored sire, standing beneath the window, would shout most emphatically Tom get up.' The Crow soon learned to wake Thomas very early in the morning as well as everyone else in the house, by shouting the well-known call with

great emphasis. One day the boys had a big bonfire in the field. The Crow watched the exciting scene with great interest and soon joined in the hurrahs of his boyish companions. After that whenever the bird saw a cloud of smoke arising from the chimney he saluted it with rousing cheers."

There are so many stories about crows, both wild and tame, that someone might profitably prepare an anthology of this great North American Bird.

Whatever may be said against him the crow when all is told is an amiable fellow. He may be a black rascal but he is an amusing one. All he needs to make him a valuable member of nature's community is to be kept in his place. That, it seems to me, should be man's aim for the crow, - to keep him in his place. That means, obviously, that he has a place. Long live the crow!

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Dr. E.L. Brereton of Barrie has sent in the following account of a very unusual observation. The white gyrfalcon, a color phase of the gyrfalcon species, occurs extremely rarely in Southern Ontario. Nor is the darker form any commoner. The sight of one of these rare Arctic falcons would make a banner day for any local bird watcher. Dr. Brereton writes,

"On October 26th Mrs. Brereton and I drove out the Shanty Bay road about 9.30 a.m. Just outside the town limits about 150 yards ahead of us I saw a rough-leg hawk (at first sight I thought it was a crow) fly up out of the ditch, light on the branch of a tree and proceed to tear apart a mouse and eat it. As we watched it three more rough-legs appeared soaring above the tree. From then on in the next two hours between Barrie and Shanty Bay we saw some 300 rough-legged hawks go by in a south-westerly direction. Some were low, others quite high, but all were twisting, turning and soaring around in big circles all the time gradually working south by west. This migration alone made the day a memorable one but an added incident turned it into what I would call a supermemorable day for me.

As we passed slowly through the wooded parts I was on the alert for more rough-legs. Suddenly through a break in the trees a large bird, conspicuous because of its whiteness, caught my eye. It was sitting ten feet from the ground on the lower branch of an old dead tree which stood out alone about 200 yards from us in an open pasture field. The bird was facing south and facing us. I turned to Mrs. Brereton and said, "Here is your chance to really see a snowy owl." She in turn as she adjusted her glasses remarked, "What a large bird and what immaculate whiteness!" Stepping out of the car I trained my old reliable Zeiss on the bird and immediately discovered that the supposed owl was in reality a hawk - yes, beyond any doubt it had a hawk's head. The head, throat, breast and upper part of the body were pure white. The lower part of the body down to the branch was white but a little dingy. Several inches of tail showing below the branch were pure white. There was a little dusky smudge around the eyes and as it turned its head two or three times and its body once to the right I could see dark markings on the back of the neck, back and lower edge of the wings (primaries).

The bird remained perched for a good ten minutes and I kept my binoculars close on it. As stated before it turned its head a few times and its body once to the right, probably looking at a flock of starlings on the ground some 75 yards to the west, though at the time I could not see the starlings and did not know they were there. Suddenly the bird shot out from the tree and with outstretched wings sailed rapidly towards the starlings. The latter shot up into the air as if hit by an explosion (my first sight of them). The hawk also shot straight up in the air, about turned as it followed one of the starlings, then levelled off to the west and disappeared behind some trees. As the hawk shot up I had a brief but good clear view of the wing formation. They were those of a falcon.

I waited for minutes hoping my bird would return to the open field but it did not, so I went back and up the next side road but failed to see it again. I was disappointed but very, very thankful for that ten minute's observation of so rare a species. On my return I looked up everything in my library and am quite satisfied that the bird I saw was a white gyrfalcon."

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Another interesting observation, this one from a city garden, is reported by Mr. Ralph Knights, a club member. He says,

"We have had another predatory visitor to our back garden, this time an immature shrike - northern or common, I could not say. Last winter it was a saw-whet owl with a mouse, this time a shrike with a sparrow.

It had its victim pushed in one of the lower branches of the spruce tree which is about ten feet from our kitchen window, and which is the only evergreen tree in the whole block of back gardens. The mate of the sparrow victim was badgering the bird and the rest of the sparrows and starlings were in quite an excitable mood. After a while it left its partly eaten meal and flew into a nearby maple, quite unconcerned by the scoldings it was getting from sparrows and starlings close by. It stayed in the maple for about an hour moving around from limb to limb, then darted down again to the spruce where it finished its meal. Watching closely from the cellar window I could distinguish it cramming the feathered flesh down its throat. After a while it flew away with the carcass.

Its color was more mousy brown than gray and its square black eye mark was undistinguishable; its tail was piped with white, but the breast was gray and the back brown."

ED. Note. At this time of year the bird seen was almost certainly a northern shrike.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.