



The Nature of Crows and Ravens

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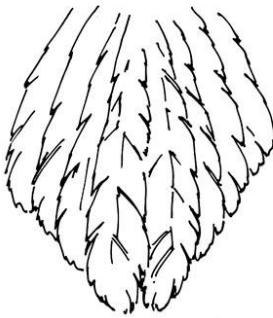
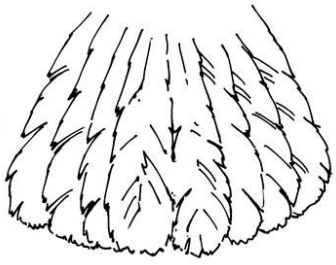
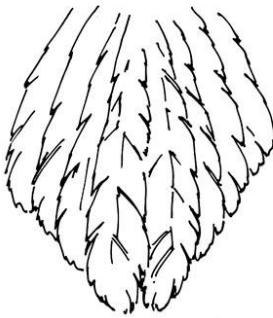
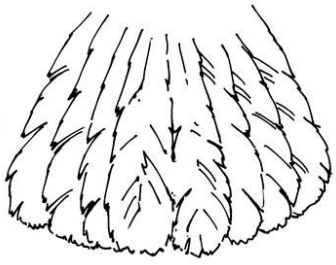
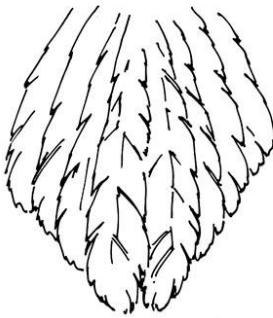
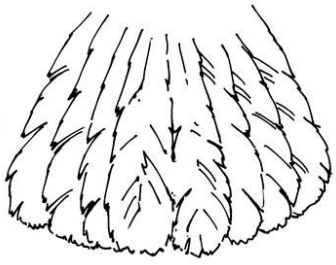
Edgar Allan Poe’s famous raven says, “Nevermore, nevermore”, but ravens and crows have been a presence for people forever and probably will be ever more. Why are people so fascinated by these birds? Are they evil, omens of death, tricksters and teachers, or just big, black songbirds? Mythology about crows and ravens is pervasive across cultures, but with these birds, fact is much more interesting than fiction.



image from wdfw.wa.gov

The Real Raven and the Cunning Crow

Ravens and crows belong to the bird family Corvidae which also includes jays, nutcrackers, and magpies. They exist on every continent except for Antarctica. New Hampshire has one species of raven and two species of crows: American crows and fish crows. All are all black and all are technically songbirds.

<p>The ravens are by far the largest and have a more shaggy appearance. They prefer dense forest and are rare in cities. Fish crows are the smallest, but telling them apart from American crows is difficult until one becomes familiar with the different calls and behaviors of the two species. Both ravens and crows have a large repertoire of calls and use these calls to communicate.</p>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Raven</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Crow</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;"></td> </tr> </table>	Raven	Crow		
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<p>Ravens have wedge-shaped tails and crows have fan-shaped tails. wdfw.wa.gov</p>					

Ravens and crows are exceptionally intelligent birds. They can discern individual human faces. They can share information with other crows, such as the presence of dangerous places or predators. They often act as sentinels when another crow is feeding, warning of on-coming cars or other dangers. They are curious and can make use of simple tools, such as sticks for probing crevices.

Family Life and Social Life

Crows and ravens live an average 7-8 years in the wild, although one rare bird lived 29.5 years. As is common with other birds, many baby crows never live to leave the nest. Although nests are built by both males and females, incubation of eggs is performed solely by females. Because males and females look the same, observation of nesting and reproductive behaviors is the only reliable way to determine a crow's sex in the field.

According to research done by Kevin J. McGowan of Cornell University, "American Crows are cooperative breeders. Offspring remained with their parents for one to six years and helped their parents raise young. 80% of observed nests had helpers. Some individuals left the parental group and helped a sibling who had a breeding spot. Fish Crows did not have helpers attending their nests. No marked Fish Crow was ever seen attending the nest of its parents. (One) Fish Crow was observed at several nests and (it) even fed nestlings, but in all cases the parents reacted aggressively toward the third individual." Observations such as these are often the key to proper identification of the species.

Regardless of species, ravens and crows are very social. They frequently form foraging flocks. In areas with a large supply of food, these flocks may number in the thousands. Flocks of any size help to provide safety and, at night, warmth. Gatherings of crows or ravens are poetically called "murders", although scientists prefer to call them what they call other bird groups, flocks.

The (Perceived) Dark Side of Ravens and Crows

Ravens and crows are intelligent birds. They observe us humans and take advantage of opportunities we provide to them. These birds are capable of hunting their own food, but it is often easier for them to scavenge. They know that food is abundant following a battle or by the roadside. They watch us and know many of our habits. They communicate in ways that we cannot always understand. They gather in large groups and their calls can be loud and unnerving. At times they mock us, using our own words against us or attempting to turn our territories into their territories. Aboriginal mythologies frequently portray these birds as tricksters. European lore often associates them with the devil. The more you learn about them, however, the more you will respect crows and ravens as a rich part of our cultural and natural heritage.

Have a Happy Halloween, "caws" the Lamprey River belongs to all of us.

Sources:

<http://www.ascaronline.org/crowfaq.htm>

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/crows/crowfaq.htm#raven>

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McGowan, Kevin J., Ecology & Systematics, Cornell University

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