At Home With Birds

Crows Around the Home

by Scott R. Craven

Few birds are as easily recognized by sight or sound as the crow. Sometimes referred to as the common or American Crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchos* is a common sight in the eastern United States and can be found coast to coast, although in the central plains crows are restricted to wooded riparian habitat and areas of human development. In Wisconsin crows are common throughout the state and in all seasons, although a few northern crows may shift southward during the winter months. In fact, The Wisconsin Checklist Project, sponsored by WSO, identified the American Crow as the most frequently reported species in the state.

Crows are not the only large black birds on the landscape. In northern Wisconsin Common Ravens are quite common, and an occasional raven might stray south as far as Adams, Juneau, or Marquette County. However, ravens are larger than crows, have a more massive bill, a distinctive throaty call, and are less prone to frequent areas of human activity. Along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts fish crows overlap with the common crow but they are smaller and not found in Wisconsin. A large grackle might be mistaken for a crow by the novice birder, but the call, size, iridescence, and behavior are quite different.

Taxonomically crows are passerines—perching birds—just like our favorite songbirds. However, they are seldom thought of with the same feelings of pleasure and excitement. Crows are much more likely to stimulate feelings of suspicion and dislike. Why? Perhaps this is because they are large, boisterous, very wary, or victimized by the same poor public relations that conjures up images of horror stories and Halloween nights when we discuss bats or ravens. Perhaps it is because of the many real or perceived problems caused by crows in farm fields, urban areas, and right in your own backyard. Even the collective name for a group of crows—a “murder”—does little to inspire a positive feeling. No matter what the reasons, crows are not high on most people’s list of favorite birds—except on mine.

It’s important to discuss a little about the crow before I can attempt to improve the birds’ public image. A
physical profile is simple. The crow is jet black, with a slight metallic gloss, from bill to tail and back to toe. The only non-black coloration is the brown eyes of adults and the blue eyes of young crows. There are also numerous records of albino crows. There is little sexual dimorphism. A typical adult bird is 17–21 inches long, weighs about one pound, give or take several ounces, and has a wingspread of about 3 feet. Crows are excellent flyers, generally territorial during nesting, but roost and feed in large flocks, and will eat virtually anything.

Crows nest high in a tree in April and May. The nest is solidly constructed of branches and twigs with a comfortable nest bowl lined with whatever soft debris or plant material the crow can find. A typical clutch of 4–6 bluish-green, variably splotted eggs is incubated for 18 days. Young crows fledge at 4–5 weeks of age.

Except during the nesting season, crows generally gather in large communal night roosts, often in groves of mature evergreens. At dusk the crows from a particular roost will assemble from all directions, often at one or more staging areas near the roost. Just about dark they proceed to settle into the roost. A huge swirling flock of roosting crows can be a spectacular sight. At first light in the morning the crows disperse across the countryside or city to feed. Feeding crows can turn up just about anywhere many miles from their night roost. However roosting or nesting crows require large trees. Thus, neighborhoods with mature trees, or homes near parks, greenways, cemeteries, or undeveloped woodlots are most likely to support crows.

Crows gather in large flocks to roost or feed, but also to mob a mortal enemy, like a Great Horned Owl. A congregation of swooping, diving, raucous crows usually has a hapless owl or hawk as its focal point. The function of mobbing is poorly understood, but it certainly serves to mobilize and alert all the crows in the area and to temporarily neutralize the predator. This mobbing behavior was well known to crow hunters. Owl decoys and crow calls were standard equipment used to cause wary crows to throw caution to the wind and join the attack.

Although a crow’s best known vocalization is the “caw-caw” call or note, their voice is remarkably versatile. They are excellent mimics and records cite crows that learned to mimic sounds made humans, pets and other birds. This is probably the basis for the popular belief that pet crows can be taught to talk, much like a parrot. There is no basis to the idea that a captured nestling crow should have its tongue split to improve its ability to “talk.” Such a practice would be inhumane and illegal as well!

From a population standpoint crows are doing very well, indeed, considering almost a century of persecution. Much like coyotes, crows have survived mass shooting, roost destruction, habitat change, and poisons. Both crow and coyote have been able to exploit their marvelous adaptability to thrive in the face of adversity. Crows were not abundant in Wisconsin at the time of settlement. They increased in step with human population and are now among the “top 10” most abundant Wisconsin birds. However, the fact that crows are so conspicuous tends to distort our perspective of their abundance. Crows have not only become more abundant,
they have also become more urbanized and less inclined to migrate.

This does not seem to be the portrait of an evil pest, yet crows are the cause of numerous calls to my office. Complaints fall into several categories. First on the list are concerns over the destruction of songbird eggs and nestlings by marauding crows. There is no question that crows do eat the eggs and young of other birds. There is also no doubt that the sight of a crow escaping with a helpless fledgling clamped in its beak can be traumatic for a backyard birder. The real question is what effect this predation has on songbird populations. Most ornithologists agree that it is minimal. Local impacts aside, there is little or no evidence to support the claim that crows are reducing songbird populations. Habitat changes, pesticides, and even the family cat are more worthy causes of concern.

The second complaint deals with crows foraging around trash dumpsters or ripping open plastic garbage bags. Human refuse is a major food source for urban crows, and they will pick open trash bags. However, the crows are often merely taking advantage of the damage dogs or raccoons have done overnight. A little sanitation and common sense can eliminate this problem. Simply keep dumpsters or cans tightly closed, don’t let trash accumulate on the ground, and don’t put trash out for collection until just before pickup.

The third type of complaint is related to the noise and disruption created by a crow roost, a nesting pair, or even feeding crows. They are noisy. This is the most difficult problem to address, and it’s perceived importance is defined only by individual tolerance of noise. A homeowner can minimize problems by maintaining a “clean” yard—no garden surplus, no trash bags, no open pet food dishes, etc. Prospective nesting pairs can be discouraged by scaring them or pruning potential nest trees. Beyond those simple steps taken by individuals, a nearby roost or staging area is more of a neighborhood or municipal problem that requires coordinated action. If enough individuals support the need for action against the crows, techniques for roost dispersal are available. Extension Specialists, USDA Animal Damage Control offices, and local DNR staff can provide advice on how to proceed.

The final complaint against crows is damage to farm crops. Crows will feed on a variety of crops, but they are especially fond of newly sprouted corn. Obviously this does little to enhance their image with farmers. This problem is usually addressed with scare devices, chemical seed treatments, or shooting.

Shooting crows was once a very common form of recreational hunting. It not only provided “sport” but helped solve problems—or did it? Those days are gone. Crows are now protected as migratory birds. A passage in the Wisconsin DNR hunting regulations booklet reads “Crows, grackles, red-winged blackbirds and cowbirds may not be hunted for recreation purposes. They may be killed without a federal permit ONLY IF they are causing damage or are about to cause damage to trees, crops, livestock, or wildlife or unless they are concentrated in large numbers that may constitute a health hazard or other nuisance.” While this does provide crows with some protection, the “about to cause damage” phrase clearly opens the door to substantial latitude in crow control.
What of the other side of the coin. Crows eat tremendous numbers of insects, and their fondness for road-flattened carcasses makes them perhaps our best natural sanitarians. Road kills are a major food source, yet the wary crows rarely meet the fate of thousands of opossums and other scavengers drawn to the roadside by an easy meal. Crows are superb acrobats in flight and skilled vocalists. I find them rather attractive in their stark black plumage and bold demeanor. Perhaps beauty really is in the eye of the beholder.

Regardless of which side of the crow story you align with, the crow is here to stay as a viable resident of, or visitor to, our yards. We will have to learn to live with them. For a more detailed historical and cultural perspective on crows, refer to an excellent article entitled "Murder" by Inga Brynildson in the November–December 1989 Wisconsin Trails magazine.

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