

CROWS **VERSUS** **RAVENS:** **A Tale of Two Birds**

WRITTEN BY BRUCE MACKENZIE

Common Ravens and American Crows have interesting stories to tell us about their world and the Niagara Escarpment environs. To watch their stories over time we have documentation from ornithologists since the early 1800s combined with the data from almost 100 years of Christmas Bird Counts (CBC), the 1985 and 2005 Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases (OBBA), and notes from bird watchers from Tobermory to St. Catharines.



◀ Raven with possible duck egg being taken back to the nest to feed the young. PHOTO BY BARRY CHERRIERE.

My intrigue with ravens started with a phone call in November 1976. My wife Laurie and I were working near Kapuskasing. Once a week we were allowed to leave our bush camp for an afternoon in Kapuskasing to shop and get cleaned up. It was on one of those trips that we witnessed a family of ravens taking full advantage of their mastery of the air. It was quite windy, and it was like watching a team of figure skaters or cats with wings; dives, chasing each other, rolls and even loop the loops. We had never seen anything like it before.

Later that day on our weekly phone call home I remember telling my Dad about the ravens. I recall him saying, "Bruce, they must enjoy playing. We are not alone in the pursuit of happiness." It was one of those phone calls with a parent that I remember distinctly.

Crows with their large size, raucous calls and abundance in rural and urban areas are easily discernible and likely one of the first birds that a child learns to identify. Crows are common throughout Ontario. Their spring migration starts as early as February and by April they are pretty well back on territories everywhere. By late fall they have returned to parts of the United States or southern Ontario. The American Crow ranges over almost all of the forested and farmland in North America.

Ravens are symbolic of the north and found in every province and territory in Canada. They are easily recognized because in the winter they are the big black bird in the sky. Crows, ravens, magpies and jays belong to a family of birds known as Corvids. They are considered to be the most



► The Common Raven is considered to be the most intelligent of all birds.
PHOTO BY LEE ANN FITZGIBBON.

intelligent of the birds with ravens being the smartest.

Differences

At first it is not easy to tell the difference between crows and ravens. There are striking differences though, but one has to look beyond the colour. Ravens are about 1/3 larger, have a much larger beak, a ruff of feathers at the front of the neck and a large diamond-shaped tail.

A crow's tail has straight sides. What truly separates the species is the voice. The "caw" of the crow is not comparable to the "gronk" of the raven or its other calls selected from a large vocabulary of sounds and phrases. Crows might be found in large flocks, called a "murder," and ravens are usually found as single birds or in pairs. Sometimes in winter at such large food sources as a wolf kill,

multiple ravens, known as an "unkindness," may be found.

In the early 1800s ravens and crows were found throughout Ontario. Since then agriculture and urbanization has changed the landscape. Crows benefitted tremendously from the land changes. As agriculture spread out, crows who eat much more plant products than ravens, followed the plow. Ravens, which are predators



▲ Crows have finer features than ravens. PHOTO BY BONNIE P. KINDER.

▼ Ravens have heavy beaks and a ruff of feathers on their necks. PHOTO BY BONNIE P. KINDER.



and scavengers, became restricted to the forests on the Canadian Shield. As the forests were removed ravens were persecuted and killed by scavenging on poisoned wolf baits that were laid out across the land to eliminate the wolf. Crows would often winter in the Golden Horseshoe. They may roost communally at night and in the late 1900s single roosts in the Hamilton and St. Catharines area could



◀ Painting of ravens by Bruce Mackenzie, based on a photo by Robert McCaw published in *Canadian Geographic*.

be found containing up to 4,000 birds. During the day the crows would fly out from the roosts to agricultural lands. Outside of the nesting period they are quite social.

We do not see the large roosts of crows like before. West Nile disease found our land. Corvids are very susceptible to this new disease introduced around

2000. According to CBC data, between 2000 and 2003 the numbers of crows fell precipitously. In St. Catharines CBC crow numbers went from a high of 11,050 in 1994 to 3,568 in 2001 to an outstanding low of 105 in 2003. The same trend was observed in CBCs across southern Ontario. Fortunately, we have seen the threat of

West Nile diminish and crows seem to be returning to regular numbers in the summer, but the large winter roosts are not found today.

Locations

Since 1981 the raven has been a common resident of Manitoulin Island but in 1942 it was not mentioned in an account of the Island's fauna.

It seems it took some time after the major lumbering of the Bruce and the Island in the 1800s and early 1900s for the forests to return to suitable habitat for ravens to return.

On the Bruce Peninsula, ravens nesting started to be recorded in the 1970s. According to the results of the first OBBA in 1985, ravens were found breeding



▲ Crow with twig, building a nest. The crow's tail has straight sides.

PHOTO BY ANN BROKELMAN.

north of Owen Sound on the Escarpment. The next OBBA, 2005, showed a highly significant range expansion for the bird south of Owen Sound, following the Escarpment south to north Halton.

Until 2001 only single ravens had been seen south of Orangeville but on November 12, 2001 a pair was seen at the Hilton Falls Conservation

Area in Halton. Since then successful breeding has taken place in Halton and Hamilton. Now that the southern forests are maturing the ravens are returning as well.

Along the Escarpment there is a string of quarries with high artificial cliff faces. The ravens have taken a liking to them for nesting sites. At a quarry on Stoney



▲ Fish crows have been seen at Niagara River and on Lake Ontario at Burlington. This one was photographed near Niagara Falls BY ANN BROKELMAN.

Creek Mountain a pair of ravens has been nesting successfully for at least five years and, interestingly, a pair of Peregrine Falcons has also been nesting on the same cliff face, condo-style. Ravens prefer to nest on cliff faces but where these are not available, hydro towers, bridges and trees will do. This winter, a pair of ravens has been observed near an old quarry in St. Catharines. A nesting site discovery will likely follow soon.

While crows at first benefitted from the vast

changes to the landscape and ravens essentially had disappeared, it is the adaptability, resilience and intelligence of these two species that allowed them to survive in our changing Escarpment world. In only 30 years we have seen significant expansions to the raven's range and since 2000 the crow population has changed dramatically.

Fish Crow

We know the changes are not over. Today, we see a new species of crow moving

into Ontario, the Fish Crow. A smaller cousin of the American Crow, Fish Crows are normally found along the southeast coast of the U.S. In the 1980s the species started a small inland colony in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. Now, we are finding them along the Niagara River at Queenston and for the last few springs they have been found along the shores of Lake Ontario in Burlington. They have even attempted to nest but not successfully yet. The American Crow won't be welcoming.

A phone call 43 years ago started us observing nature with a more critical eye. It seems like we have more to see.

Bruce Mackenzie** is an active naturalist living in Grimsby. A director of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club, he enjoys working on environmental projects in Niagara and kayaking along the shores of the Bruce Peninsula. He retired from the Hamilton Conservation Authority after 39 years of managing conservation areas. **NEV



Raven on nest on
cliff face of a quarry
in Stoney Creek.
PHOTO BY BRUCE MACKENZIE.