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Ravens: Lore and More

by Sheldon Dingle, Curator of Birds
 Southern Nevada Zoological Park

Believe me gentle readers, when speaking of zoos there is much to be said for small and intimate. Here at the Southern Nevada Zoological Park in Las Vegas, binoculars are not necessary. The pathways and benches are within a few feet of the exhibits. This happy condition allows the visitors to observe the animals close-up, indeed, nose to nose or nose to beak in some cases. This excellent condition also has a seldom recognized bonus — that of observing the observer. I have observed many a curious quirk in various and sundry visitors while they were looking for the same in a particular animal subject.

One of the most consistent and predictable patterns of human behavior shows up as follows: Across one wall here at the zoo there are two aviary exhibits, one containing three large and beautiful macaws and one containing two glossy black ravens. One can stand and look into both aviaries

at once. No big deal so far. Then one hears an absolutely avian voice saying: "Hello! I love you." Every eye, every time, turns to the macaw aviary to see which bird spoke.

Then again one hears, "Hello! I love you, love you, love you!" and every eye switches in amazement to the raven sitting wisely on its perch in the adjoining display. Yes, indeed, folks, the raven out talks the parrot. The visitors, however, have been programmed to expect the parrot to talk and to expect nothing spectacular about so ordinary a bird as a raven.

But is the raven an ordinary bird? I think not, my friend. A little observation and research shows it to be quite an extraordinary species of bird.

My first experience with ravens was in the boreal forests of Alaska where I often saw the large, silent, solitary raven perched atop a dead tree watching me as intently as I watched it. A raven has a way of cocking its head to one side and observing one with great curiosity. A youth at the time, I couldn't help feeling that the raven was much more intelligent than I. Time has proven that early surmise correct.

Photo courtesy of author



Raven: one of the feistiest residents of the Southern Nevada Zoo.

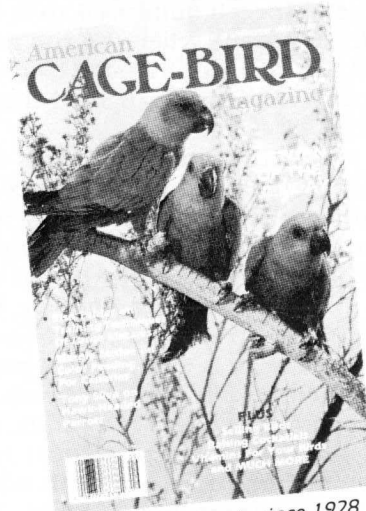
So just who is this large, black bird and where does it fit into the bird world? The *Corvidae* family includes crows, jays, pies, choughs and nut-crackers and no matter where in the world you hail from, you'll surely be familiar with some member of this family. Our raven, *Corvus corax corax*, is the largest all-black species and comes under the "crow" heading. There are significant differences, however, between crows and ravens. Ravens are much larger than the American crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* and have noticeably heavier bills. It has a more rounded, graduated tail and more pointed, narrower wings. It also has hackle-like throat feathers which can be raised at will, as can the feathers over the eyes. The massive bill is curved at the top and has bristles covering the nostrils.

The raven, unlike its relative, the crow, has not adjusted well to civilization and has been pushed back into the wilder and less inhabited areas of its former range. The wild ravens I've personally observed have been in two very different environments, the Alaska forests and the Nevada/California deserts, but both areas were wild and remote and devoid of regular human populations, a few scruffy prospectors or trappers excepted.

Another way to tell ravens from crows is by their voice. Everybody knows a crow's caw. Ravens don't "caw," they "corronk" and "toc-toc-toc." (Voices taken directly out of Wilmore's book on the Corvids.) The "toc" sound makes me think of wooden blocks struck for rhythm in some Latin bands. I've always found sounds very hard to replicate with descriptive words so I'll abandon the attempt and refer you to the above mentioned Wilmore.

An interesting experience related to the raven's voice happened to me years ago. Three teenage brothers, good friends of mine, were wont, as boys often are, to go deep into the desert to look for nestling hawks to bring home and train for falconry. One of their forays produced a nestling raven which they promptly presented to me, it being useless for their purposes. I tried and tried to hand feed the little bugger, but it wouldn't open its beak no matter what I tried. I finally pried the baby's beak open and rammed some food down its throat on the eraser end of a pencil, but I knew this method would not keep the bird alive. Frantically, I called the boys. They said all I had to

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do was talk to the baby raven and it would eat.

This would pose no problem. "Nice raven, eat your food," said I to its clamped beak. "Good birdie! Please eat the nice food," I asked the stupid thing. "Eat, you little black S.O.B., or die!" I coaxed him with gritted teeth — to no avail.

After a day of fruitless cajolery, bribery, and threats, the bird was on the point of a triumphant death when the boys showed up to see how things were going. They watched my helpless efforts and heard my mumbled threats with looks of absolute disbelief. How *could* a grown-up be so dumb? The youngest boy, the master hand feeder, took the pencil and food from my hands and, with an air of superiority, said, "You have to talk *raven*, not English" and uttered a croak in the back of his throat which caused the baby raven's beak to pop wide open.

Of course, the problem was solved and a few croaks and honks later I was happily feeding my first raven. The language lesson stood me in good stead for years afterward when I had occasion to feed any number of local crows (the dialect is not much different) and an odd raven or two.

The first raven, Cassius by name, was given his freedom and stayed around for years. He would usually come flying to me when I'd whistle. He slept on the peak of the roof of my house.

Cassius became an excellent flyer and would actually seem to play in the air. He would close his wings and nose dive; he would somersault in the air and generally behave like a hotdog pilot. Ravens seem to have fun flying and they also seem to have a well developed sense of humor. They have been seen passing stones from beak to beak, or offering a twig then jerking it back in a teasing manner. Ravens have ganged up on dogs and cats and teased them to exhaustion, one bird pecking the poor beast's tail and when it whirled around the other raven would peck its tail from the other side.

Ravens, captive and wild, have demonstrated great intelligence. A captive raven kept in a wire cage on a dirt floor masterminded a jailbreak wherein he dug under the wire from inside the cage while his accomplices dug from the outside until he escaped.

Another captive raven was housed next to a hen house. He pecked out a

rather large hole in the dividing board, then placed some bait near the hole. When a hen came to the bait, the raven lunged through the hole and tried to pull the hen into his cage, killing her in the process.

Ravens have been known to mimic human speech quite well so it is no surprise to me when the zoo ravens tell the visitors, "Hello! I love you." Actually, I rather expected them to croak, "Nevermore."

Ravens are long lived birds often living 50 years or more. One has been authentically recorded as living to the age of 69 years. They are cautious and careful, always ready to take to wing at the slightest danger. They are, however, very strong and tough birds. A raven's beak is about like a pair of needlenose pliers in the hands of a strong man. I have scars on the back of one hand where a local raven pinched out hunks of flesh while I was examining him closely. They have been known to kill other birds and are determined and dangerous when defending their territory.

Studies have indicated that ravens are quicker to learn than are dogs, cats or monkeys. They have been taught to count up to six or seven and have even learned to watch a clock and to peck a lever at the appropriate time to get food. In the wild, they are intelligent, versatile birds that are probably not appreciated nearly as much as they should be.

In the wild, the common raven is found all across the northern fourth of the globe from Greenland to Europe and eastward to the Pacific, through Alaska and Canada back to Greenland. It ranges as far south as Central America (but not into South America), North Africa and northern India.

Ravens take most of their food from the ground and are omnivorous, eating carrion, small mammals, reptiles, frogs, young or sick birds, eggs, insects, maggots, beetles, etc. They often become scavengers around campsites where they quickly learn to eat human left-over foods. A certain amount of vegetable matter is also eaten including grain, acorns and fruit. Ravens sometimes carry food or other objects in their feet and they use one or both feet to hold down pieces of food while tearing it with their powerful bill.

Many of you are familiar with the local blue jays' habit of storing away acorns. Ravens share the same food hiding behavior and tend to store up

food for future use. If a person robs the raven's hidden store of food, it will stash away more but *out of reach* of the human thief.

The species is very chatty and loquacious and has a wide variety of sounds. Indeed, not all raven noises are harsh croaks. I've heard ravens bubbling and gurgling as a water fountain, and they have the curious "toc" sound. They are very good mimics and sometimes come up with bill clicking and other sounds evidently copied from other species of birds.

The raven's voice is very expressive and each bird has its own individual repertoire of sounds in addition to the sounds that are common to all ravens.

Another thing that impresses me about ravens is the way their eyes indicate their moods. Even people not familiar with birds can look into a raven's eyes and know instantly when a bird is hostile. There is an open, glaring expression. A submissive, loving expression is also observable and, as a youth, I'm sure I recognized a distinctly superior expression in the eyes of my early raven contacts.

Unfortunately, these extraordinary birds have always been persecuted by man. Perhaps that is why they have gradually retreated as civilization has advanced into their habitat. When persecuted, ravens become exceedingly wily and cautious and I've been told that old ravens could recognize when a person was carrying a shotgun or rifle and that they'd always stay out of range. Again, the older and wiser ravens are almost impossible to trap, although they'll approach a trap once they see it is sprung and harmless. The young ravens are not so canny and they are the ones that suffer greater mortality at the hands of farmers and sportsmen. It is a tribute to the raven's great intelligence that if it survives man's first assault, man won't have another good shot.

Ravens do not seem to be decreasing in numbers at this time and in many areas they are protected by law so they will probably hold their own in the foreseeable future. These are large, strong, intelligent birds that provide a valuable service as they scavenge and clean up the wilderness areas. They deserve our respect. When next you see a raven, whether in the zoo or in the wilderness, tip your hat to it and bid it good day. It may well respond in kind. ●