

Wisconsin Wildlife *Fast Facts*

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A child once asked me ...“If you could be a bird....what kind would you be?” My reply came quickly. “I would be a crow.” I said.

A crow can live just about anywhere. He can eat practically anything. He is curious and intelligent. He has lots of friends and keeps close to his relatives. He defends his comrades. He plays a lot and sometimes gets into a little mischief. When he walks he struts with a stately tread. He can soar like an eagle. He can dive like a falcon. Yes... I believe a crow has a good life.

A raven on the other hand – although similar in many ways, is a very different bird. To me it is an ancient ghost-like thing.....a relic of a place and time when harsh conditions converged to forge a bird of such rough and robust magnificence. It is the quintessential Neanderthal of all perching birds. Ravens are to crows...as gorillas are to chimpanzees. To me, the raven is every-bit an equal icon of the great northern wilderness as a common loon.

The Crow and the Raven



crow



raven

Common Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
(Latin: raven) (Greek: short-beaked)

Synonyms:

American crow, An-deg' (Chippewa for “those that come in the spring”), Kakakshi (Potawatomi), Kakakew (Menominee)

Description:

A large, completely black perching bird, whose feathers have a glossy, slightly iridescent look.

Length: 16"-21" Wingspread: to 40" Weight: to 1 ½ lbs. Males average the largest.

The legs and toes are strong.

Young have blue eyes. Adults have black eyes.

A ground and tree gleaner and forager.

In flight, has a patient, methodical flapping pattern that is rarely broken up with glides.

Origin and history:

It is believed that true crows first appeared in Asia during the Miocene (12 MYA) after diverging from ancestral stem stock, which originally evolved in Australia. They also appear in the fossil record of North America at this time.

Following human colonization, a large number of crow species have become extinct worldwide.

This is especially true of island groups (i.e.: New Zealand, Hawaii, and Greenland).

Crows were regularly hunted as food by humans up to the Iron Age.

Wisconsin status:

Locally common and widely distributed permanent residents statewide.

Northern birds may withdraw a short distance south during severe winters.

Habitat:

Prefers open areas with scattered trees, especially in agricultural and grassland areas.

Also in forests, suburban areas, urban parks, metropolitan and coastal areas.

Ecological Signature:

By consuming and/or caching fruits, berries and nuts (hard and soft mast), crows are dispersal-agents of seeds. This behavior has a strong influence on the diversity and distribution of many of the most important wildlife food plants in our region.

Intelligence:

Make tools, play tricks on each other and speak to kin in a dialect of their own.

Tool use and sophistic social behavior are both hallmarks of higher intelligence.

This will impress you.....[YouTube - Crow intelligence](#)

Crows have demonstrated an ability to recognize and distinguish one individual human from another by facial features (I have observed this in several species of hawks too).

Crows are extremely difficult to capture in most traps.

Behavior:

Most defend large, all-purpose territories where everyone cooperates in locating and chasing-off predators.

Family groups usually post a sentinel while foraging.

Often congregate in large winter roosts (to tens of thousands).

Anting- Crow perches on ant hill, allowing ants to swarm over its body (removing lice & mites?). Sometimes grabs an ant and swabs it over plumage (formic acid cleansing?).

Voice and Communication:

Soft gurgling : An affectionate beckoning (come here)

Short, sharp, high-pitched staccato “caw , caw, caw”: Alarm or alert (danger).

Short, repetitive, stereotyped “double calls”: Call to arms!

Slow medium-loud “caaawww, caaawww, caaawww:” : Rally call–“hey, over here....something’s up!”

Quick, repetitive “CAW-AW, CAW-AW” : “look here!”.

Rapid, irregular intervals of long, broken, drawn-out calls: “I am hurt” or “I am in trouble”

Long caws (often followed by counter-call replies): Territorial exchange- “I am here”.

Harsh, loud rasping caws: Probably cursing while mobbing a predator.

Melodic “coos” accompanied by bowing posture: Pair greeting and bonding.

Multiple birds making growling calls w/high pitched screech-like calls: An outright brawl is in progress. (An owl is probably having a very bad day).

Special Adaptations and abilities:

The remarkable bill functions like an all-purpose Swiss army knife. It can probe, hammer, scoop, chop, chisel, pick, twist, tug, tear, crush, slice and dice - rendering practically any edible object into a swallowable form.

A crow can hold a nut in its foot while “hammering” it with its beak.

May drop a tough nut from a great height to a hard surface.

May deliberately drop nuts in busy roadway (crosswalks) for passing cars to crush.

Then, when the crosswalk signal allows, the waiting crow proceeds to safely claim its booty.

See for yourself.....[YouTube - Fascinating intelligence of crows](#)

Can hear lower sound frequencies than we can.

Average (direct) flight speed is 32 mph. Capable of short bursts to 60 mph (no tail wind).

Diet:

Virtually anything that is palatable and nutritious (even marginally).

Over 600 food items have been reported.

Commercial grains include corn, wheat, oats, buckwheat, barley, sorghum, & sunflower. Although agricultural crops are leading foods for crows in each region, a large share of these are obtained through gleaning of fields after harvest.

Mast includes oak, dogwood, serviceberry, strawberry, mulberry , blackberry, grape & cherry.

Meat and nuts are often stored in hidden (leaves), scattered, short-term caches for later use.

Normally 30% animal matter, but this depends on season and resources of the region.

Insects (esp. grasshoppers, scarab beetles, & caterpillars), spiders, worms, snails, amphibians, small reptiles, birds (incl. eggs & young) & small mammals.

Carion of all types.

Opportunistic – crows quickly take advantage of new food sources.

Reproduction:

Nest building (both sexes participate) begins in early March (WI).

Nest is in tree (occasionally large shrub) at 15' to 50'.

4-5 greenish, brown-speckled eggs are down in early March and incubated for 18 days.

Female incubates while male forages and provides.

Young fledge at 35 days - some remain with their parents for several seasons and assist with the raising of future siblings.

Crows are sexually mature at 2 years.

Life span:

Wild record of 14 yrs. 7 months.

Mortality & disease:

Crows are highly susceptible to West Nile Virus. Very few birds survive exposure.

Most die within one week of infection. Since 1999 the United States crow population has been reduced by 45% by this disease.

Also avian cholera (bacterium), avian tuberculosis (bacterium), aspergillosis (fungi), toxoplasmosis (sporozoan), salmonellosis (bacterium), Newcastle's disease (virus), Leucocytozoon (blood parasite), coccidiosis (sporozoan) and Haemoproteus (blood parasite).

The dark side:

Large foraging flocks may damage orchards and cornfields.

Crows may destroy newborn cattle, sheep and goats (or damage their eyes and navels).

They are sometimes considered a nuisance - noisy and messy (scatter garbage).

Where concentrated, their feces represent a biological hazard (pathogens).

Has been implicated in the spread of transmissible gastroenteritis-a disease of baby pigs.

Most serious problems occur in the vicinity of large winter roost sites.

They occasionally destroy nests and eggs of valued game birds and waterfowl.

Crow control-campaigns (bounties) have been implemented (and rescinded) in the past.

Mitigation includes scare devices (broadcast alarm calls, pyrotechnics & visual devices).

The brighter side:

By eating fruits & caching nuts, crows are seed-dispersal agents (see ecological signature).

Crows consume large numbers of commercially-destructive insect pests.

As scavengers, crows consume large quantities of biologically-hazardous refuse and carrion.

Human dimensions and conservation status:

Despite universal persecution and former government-sanctioned campaigns to reduce its numbers, crows have persisted and thrived- especially in agricultural, urban and large metropolitan areas. Although a recent exotic pathogen (WNV) has recently caused heavy losses, the future of this adaptable and resilient bird in North America appears secure.

Crows are managed as “game birds” (or varmints) in Wisconsin and several other states.

Wisconsin open season: January 25 - March 20th and September 12 - November 19
Distinguish them from ravens before you shoot (and) If you hunt them.... you should eat them.....[..recipes.htm](#).



Common Raven *Corvus corax*

(Latin: raven) (Greek: raven)

Synonyms:

Northern raven, Ka-gog-i' (Chippewa) , Deetry'a (Kutchin of interior Alaska)

Names of Lore:

Wolf Bird, Lord of the Hinterlands, All-knowing, all-seeing Great Croaker, The Black One (Black, to many Native American tribes, is a color of magical power, and only to be feared if misused. The raven is the guardian of both ceremonial magic and healing circles in several tribal cultures.), Trickster – (Also Native American and similar to the Norse Loki).

Messenger first sent forth from the Ark by Noah

Hrafn (Old Norse) was the whisperer of secrets to Odin (Nordic God)

Description:

A large to massive, entirely iridescent-black bird with a tapered (wedge-shaped) tail.

Bill is large and slightly-curved.

Long, pointed (shaggy-looking) throat feathers.

Length: 22" - 27", Wingspread: 45" - 60", Weight: 1 ½ - 3 ¾ lbs. (to 4X more than crow)

Birds from colder regions are the largest.

Eight recognized subspecies worldwide.

One of two species (thick-billed raven) being the largest and heaviest of all passerine birds.

Origin:

Ravens originated in the old world in the early Miocene (12 MYA) and immigrated to North America via Beringia during the Pleistocene (1.5 MY to 10,000 YA). Worldwide, there are only two clades (distinct populations)- a California clade (SW U.S.) and Holarctic clade (rest of the northern hemisphere).

Canadian birds (and most in U.S.) are more related to European and Asian birds than those from the California clade. Birds from both clades look alike, but are genetically distinct and don't interbreed.

Wisconsin status:

Fairly common permanent resident in the north.

Uncommon resident in central WI.

Rare fall migrant western and eastern region.

History:

Early Wisconsin settlers reported the bird statewide.

Nearly extirpated from WI and MN in late 19th Century, due to extensive logging (cutover).

By 1900 it was driven from most of the Midwest and Eastern U.S by shooting & poisoning.

In Wisconsin it was restricted to remote north and central forest blocks with southern observations confined to the Lake Michigan shoreline.

By 1940, it was considered a rare summer resident (breeder), even in the north.

It has since returned with protection, forest re-growth and succession.

Range:

The common raven has the largest range (worldwide) of any bird in the Corvid genus.

Mountains of Guatemala to the arctic circle (seasonally) in North America.

Throughout Eurasia, African Sahara Desert and slopes of the Himalayas.

Habitat:

Heavily forested, arctic, sub-arctic and alpine wilderness and associated coastlines.

Most prefer wooded areas near large expanses of open land, lakeshores or coastal areas.

Plains, desert, open scrub, canyons and cliffs.

Elevations to 20,600 feet.

Territory:

17 to 44 square kilometers, depending on available resources.

Few territorial disputes occur as birds are usually tolerant of each other.

Intelligence and Behavior:

Although the cerebral cortex is not complex (like in mammals) the hyperstriatum (part of forebrain) is highly-developed (more-so than any other bird) and enables acute problem solving, imitation and insight.

A raven can make complex decisions and enjoys a rich awareness.

Has the cognitive capability of many primates.

Smarter than cats and dogs.

Strong family bonds (although sometimes quarrelsome).

A “follow me” display appears to solicit (manipulate) hunters to a potential kill-candidate.

Unlike crows, ravens appear reluctant to mob or harass owls.

Soars often (crows rarely do this).

Adults typically travel as mated pairs.

If a member of a pair is missing, its mate will reproduce the calls of its missing partner.

Ravens watch and remember where their comrades have stashed food and return later to steal from their caches.

Some ravens become “social liars”. They intentionally deceive associate competitors by directing them to a false food source (while) they exploit the actual resource by themselves.

Young birds have a high interest in unusual (bright, shiny or round) objects.

Mature birds lose interest in such things, and often become fearful (neophobic) of them.

Ravens play – especially juveniles, who roll or slide down snow banks or toss twigs about.

Juveniles have a strong innate tendency to test (challenge) the reactions of wolves and dogs. This resembles a game of tag (catch me if you can), where both animals participate.

A raven will rarely (if ever) chase a crow one-on-one. A crow will frequently chase a raven one-on-one.

At a kill site, ravens appear to be more suspicious than wolves. One wildlife filmmaker claimed “You can sneak up on a wolf...but never a raven!”.

If you see two birds perched close together, they are either paired or preening-partners (real good friends).

Ravens can manipulate the outcomes of their social interactions. When feeding at a carcass, juvenile ravens (as subordinates) will vocally solicit other juveniles to join-in.....so that the additional birds will reduce (diffuse) their competition with more-aggressive adult crows and other scavengers.

[Ravens and Intelligence Video -- National Geographic](#) (video starts after 60 second advertisement)

Voice and communication:

Entire books have been written on this subject. In general, a raven's call has one basic purpose.... to attract attention to itself. By using its voice, patterns of feather erection, and body posture it communicates rank, anger, fear, hunger, curiosity, playfulness, boldness, and (occasionally) depression or discouragement. While a vocabulary does not appear to exist in ravens, researchers have identified and assigned several sounds to specific events. In other words...ravens don't communicate with

precise words – they communicate with actions, postures and sounds which reveal context-specific situations.

A deep, long raspy squawk: a ground predator is nearby!

A sharp “rack – rack – rack!” : bird is alarmed and leaving the area.

A soft “grow” : trust or friendship

A repetitive knocking “toc – toc – toc” : female “power display” (asserting her dominance over other females).

A rapid “rap–rap–rap” : “Notice me...I’m over here” (usually given when another raven is flying nearby).

The great difficulty in determining the meaning of raven vocalizations is due to the tremendous variation in (culturally-transmitted) tones and dialects between birds of different regions. Furthermore, those living at dialect boundaries tend to be bilingual.

Size is everything:

Body size and posture quickly determines status in raven society.....

In the company of others, a dominant male will flaunt his size – puffing-up while strutting slow and deliberately with his head and bill held high. He will puff-out his ear and neck feathers and occasionally forcibly snap his bill to impress others (esp. other males) of his power. He blinks or “flashes” the whitish nictitating membranes of his eyes....like little light bulbs turning on and off. In essence, his strutting presents “an air of cockiness....like some street thug who is hogging the sidewalk”.

If the bird he is directing this performance to is suitably impressed (or intimidated) it will tuck its head in close and lower its bill. If- however, the recipient is not impressed (and fails to assume a subordinate posture) a serious fight may ensue (which is rare).

Diet:

Mostly animal matter including Insects, invertebrates, amphibians, snakes, turtles, fish, rodents, hares, small birds (including their eggs and young).

Unlike crows (who can live on grain), ravens appear to require more protein in their diet.

Carrion (including maggots and carrion beetles).

The automobile, the deer hunter and the wolf have been indispensable as providers of carrion for ravens.

Ravens occasionally eat cereal grains, berries and fruit.

They will glean undigested grain from cattle manure (crows do this too).

They will cache surplus food (especially matter containing fat) for later use.

Reproduction:

Pair bond for life (although occasional “infidelity” has been observed in some males).

Begins nesting in mid to late January.

Nest is a deep bowl of sticks, lined with grass, mud, shredded bark and/or deer hair.

Nest is usually a cliff or large tree (esp. conifer) and sometimes on a power line or billboard.

3 to 6 (usually 5) pale bluish-green eggs w/brown blotches are put down in early February (WI) to April in the extreme northern sub-arctic.

Incubation is by the female for 18 to 21 days.

Young fledge at 5 to 6 weeks and may remain with parents for 6 months.

Ravens are sexually mature at 3 yrs.

Life span:

Typically 10 – 15 years in the wild.

Banded bird recovery of 13 years.

A resident Tower of London bird exceeded 40 years.

Mortality & disease:

See crow diseases above. Note: arctic and sub-arctic birds appear to be more susceptible to common pathogens, which are more prevalent further south.

Avian predators include great-horned owls, goshawks, gyrfalcons, eagles, and (possibly) red-tailed hawks.

Fishers, wolverines and raccoons are potential nest predators.

The dark side:

May damage nut and grain crops.

May injure or kill young calves, lambs and goat kids.

As raven numbers increased in the Mojave Desert, juvenile desert tortoises (a threatened species) have faced greater risk of predation by ravens.

A population increase in Alaska is posing a threat to Steller’s eiders (nest predation).

The brighter side:

As carrion-eaters, ravens reduce the extent of biologically-hazardous carrion on the landscape.

Human dimensions and conservation status:

The raven has been both revered and condemned by northern cultures for as long as humans have shared its domain. As with most wildlife/human relationships, the raven's reputation (and value) has always been determined by the nature of its interactions with people at the time.

Even in recent times, the native Kutchin of the Alaskan sub-arctic interior continue to regard the raven as no-more than a common varmint, who robs their hare snares, ruins their meat caches (pecking and excrement) and raids their fish drying racks.

Despite its large size and intelligence, the raven has demonstrated itself to be sensitive to human persecution. Today, with increased protection, ravens are holding their own and even experiencing a range-expansion in the northeastern United States.