

Crows and people have a lot in common

By Heather M. Lightner

You may see them sitting on telephone lines, watching, waiting—calling out to their companions to communicate some sort of secret message. You may see them clustered in trees, so many in fact, that trees appear to have black leaves. You may see them picking at road kill on North Main Road or silhouetted, in flight, against a sunny, blue sky, but one thing is for sure, if you live in Jamestown, you will see them: American crows.

Widely recognized, but largely misunderstood, American crows have been labeled as loud, annoying scavengers and have been tirelessly hunted by agricultural landowners. Its dark color and eerie symbolism have caused people to associate the bird with death and the mystic world, adding to the public's negative perception of these birds. However, there is much more to these birds than their taste for road kill or the Hitchcock-type imagery the bird inevitably brings to mind.

American crows are common throughout the majority of the United States. Weighing between 11 and 22 ounces, and measuring anywhere from 16 to 21 inches, both sexes are similar in appearance, however, males, on average, are slightly larger than females.

Despite its reputation for dining on road kill, carrion is only a very small part of its diet. Because its bill is not strong enough to break through the skin of even small animals, it is at the mercy of another animal, natural selection, or perhaps, a car to provide the birds with a meal of flesh.

Crows have a varied diet, which, in addition to carrion, includes seeds, waste grain, earthworms, garbage, amphibians, insects, mice, bird eggs and nestlings.

The birds construct an open cup-like nest comprised of sticks and filled with mud and grass to hold a clutch of two to seven pale bluish-green eggs with brown markings. One- to two- feet in diameter, the nest of the American crow is lined with a thick inner bowl of grapevine bark, hair, and other soft material and is usually found high within trees.

"It's [the nest] just a bunch of random sticks," explains Jamestown resident Chris Powell, a biologist and chairman of the island's conservation commission. Powell says if people keep their eyes peeled, they may catch a glimpse of one of these nests in the tree line as they make their way off the island via the Newport Bridge.

Powell, who is also the co-founder of the Jamestown Raptor



Project, has participated in the island's bi-annual bird count (conducted in the spring and at Christmas time), which has been organized for more than twenty years by his wife Candy and Jamestown resident Evelyn Rhodes. The bird count has shown increasing numbers of crows on the island in recent years. Prior to the 1990s, twice as many crows were counted in the spring than were counted during the December holiday season.

"It's really hard to tell if there are more birds because they're more prevalent or because they are more active in the spring," admits Powell. Still, a healthy crow population is a good sign, since crows, along with jays, are highly susceptible to the West Nile virus.

Surprisingly, though American crows have a largely unfavorable reputation, the birds have much in more in common with humans than one might expect. Gregarious and highly intelligent, American Crows, like people, form tight knit bonds with their family and other birds within their community.

According to Cornell University's prestigious ornithology lab, young crows live with their parents until they can find a home of their own. Though American Crows sometimes begin breeding at the age of two, most delay starting a family until they are four or more years old. Oftentimes young crows will remain with their parents and help them raise new generations of crows. Crow families may include as many as 15 individuals and contain youngsters from five different years.

"They do form tight knit family structures, especially during this time of year, breeding season," explains conservation biologist and Jamestown resident Carol Lynn Trocki. Trocki works for the U.S. National Park Service and teaches wildlife management in the University of Rhode Island's Natural Resource Science Department in Kingston.

As is the case with other types of birds, the American crow mates for life. The pair bonding is based not on monogamy as we know it in the human world, but rather on the ability to successfully produce offspring.

"If they are successful [with mating] they will stay mated," says Trocki, "if they aren't successful, they won't stay mated."

These very familial and social birds, like people, live together year-round in a common territory. Though members of the crow's extended family will forage together, individual crows will leave the home territory every now and then throughout the year to join large flocks foraging in fields and dumps. Family members may go to these flocks together, but tend to disperse in the crowd, much like children from the same family

separating upon arriving at school together. As humans do, crows may spend part of their day with their family at one location and another part of their day feeding on waste grain somewhere else. During the winter, they will sleep in large flocks.

Flocking together, especially in winter, may be a way for crows to communicate information about food resources and protect themselves against such predators as red tailed hawks and great horned owls. American crows, when threatened by hawks or owls, are known to exhibit mobbing behavior—which involves crows loudly sounding off to alert other birds that a hawk or an owl is in the area, collectively driving the unwanted visitor away.

Though researchers have learned many things about crows in recent years, much is still unknown about how crows communicate information, notes Trocki.

"They're one of the few birds that can be taught to talk," asserts Powell, who says he befriended a crow named Sam during his college years in Virginia, when he worked as a park naturalist for the Fairfax County Park Authority. "Kids used to come in to listen to him talk."

Crows, like humans, have the capacity to learn through experience. The highly intelligent birds have been known to hide items and retrieve them at a later date. Scientists say crows are also capable of remembering members of their family, even after being separated from them for months or even years.

Some crows are even tool users. Researchers have even observed one species of crows on the island of New Caledonia using leaves and twigs to reach insects in dead wood. This behavior, explains Trocki, demonstrates conscious thought and problem solving.

"That's evidence of a higher level of understanding—the idea that you could use an object outside yourself to accomplish something. They're extremely intelligent birds," said Trocki. "They're fascinating," she adds, "very social, very communicative and interactive."

Though frequently maligned in movies and vilified in literature, Powell hopes people will be more open-minded and accepting of the American crow, which despite its dark symbolism and love of rotting carcasses, has much in common with the people who have despised and killed these beautiful, intelligent birds.

"I think every animal in nature has a place, a niche," explains Powell. "We all have a function and fulfill a role."

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