
Large Black Birds

by: Jacky Davis

HOW TO TELL RAVENS FROM CROWS

Ravens have been much in evidence in my part of town this fall and winter. In fact, they're pretty hard to miss. They look a lot like the crows I remember from my Iowa childhood, but the Audubon Society's *Birds of Phoenix and Maricopa County* says the crow is a rare



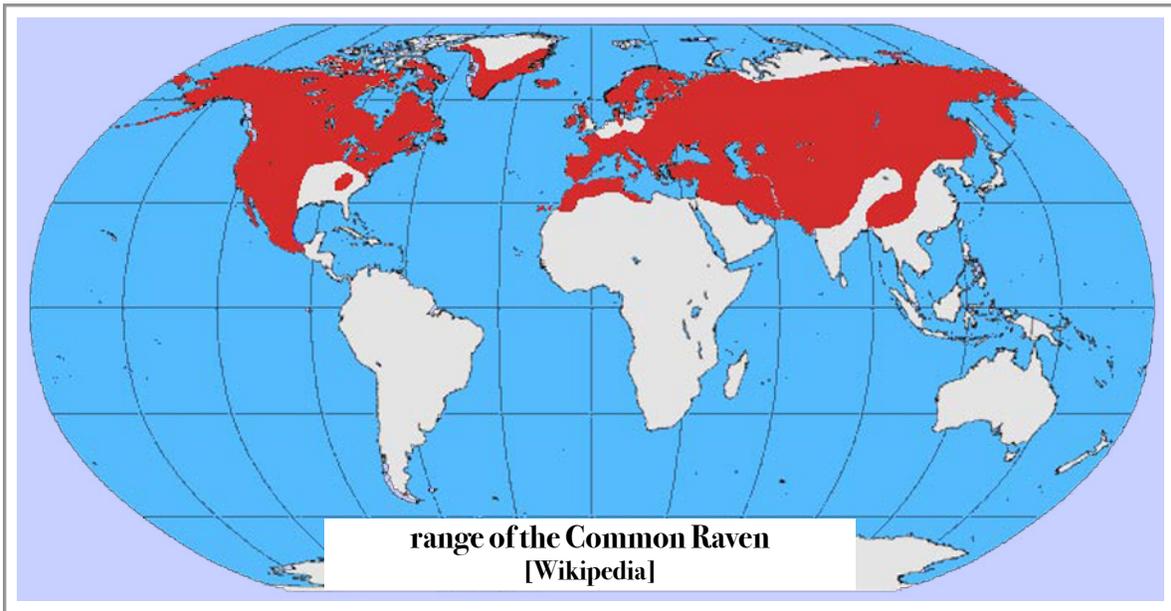
transient here, and these large black birds fit the description of the common raven very well. I've seen them singly or in pairs sitting on the overhead power lines or as many as seven or eight of them together roosting in a snag. They lift off with a raucous k-r-r-r, to swoop and glide among the trees and saguaros, black feathers glistening in the sunlight, and I find them beautiful and entertaining to watch. Of course, I've also seen them on the road picking over remnants of luckless rodents, and I've heard they are very hard on the infant populations of the desert tortoise. I decided I needed to know more about them and went looking for information.



Warner Shedd, former executive for the National Wildlife Federation, in his recent book, *Owls Aren't Wise and Bats Aren't Blind - A Naturalist Debunks Our Favorite Fallacies about Wildlife*, treats some popular misconceptions about the behavior of certain animals, crows and ravens among them. On the theory that the more we understand about how animals behave, the more we will be bound to admire them as much as he does, he shares his own knowledge and experiences. Ravens and crows are, he says, much more interesting and complex than usually supposed, and, in all probability, among the most intelligent of birds.

Ravens and crows, as well as jays and magpies, belong to the family *Corvidae*. They are also classed as songbirds, making the raven the largest songbird as well as the largest all-black bird in the world. At a distance a small raven can be confused with a large crow, but when they are together the raven is visibly heavier and is distinguished by a larger, stouter bill, shaggy throat feathers, and a wedge-shaped rather than a squared-off tail, noticeable mainly in flight.

Though the two birds have much in common, in at least two aspects ravens outshine crows. First the raven¹ is simply a remarkable flier. Here in the desert we can often see them soaring high in the sky, turning and gliding in intricate and graceful maneuvers or playing complicated aerobatic games with each other. And



¹ Editor: Common Raven; *Corvus corax*



vocally the raven is far more accomplished. Both species are known to mimic humans, but according to some sources the raven has been known to have more than 30 distinct vocalizations. Their call is quite coarse, but I've also heard a soft bubbling gurgle from a raven sitting high on a power line. Shedd says the raven often just doesn't choose to try to make the sounds we want to hear, but scientist Bernd Heinrich, who has written a book called *Mind of the Raven* and who has studied the animal thoroughly, has been quite impressed with its abilities. According to Heinrich, there are accounts of a raven "imitating radio static, a motorcycle being revved up, the sound of flushing urinals, and—most astonishing—an imitation of a demolition expert saying 'three, two, one,' followed by a reasonable facsimile of a dynamite explosion."

In feeding habits, too, there are distinctions, though both birds have earned a negative reputation because of their appetites. Ravens are scavengers, occasionally predatory on small animals, and common visitors to garbage dumps. They have been known to feed on dying livestock and to scavenge on animals killed by other larger predators. They aren't crop eaters but will eat fruit and seeds in season and can, because of their size, prey on mid-sized animals like squirrels and cottontails. Crows, on the other hand, especially like sprouting corn and other seed crops, which may explain their absence in this area, though they also feed on insects and a variety of other small animals, and are not averse to carrion, garbage, or birds' eggs.

The two also live in very different social environments. Crows are by far the more gregarious, living in large flocks and raising their young in large extended families in which the young, unmated members help the older pair to build a nest and feed the young. Ravens, on the other hand, are more solitary in nature and considered to be completely monogamous (unless a partner dies, when it chooses another mate), and the adult pair builds its nest and raises its young without help from others. In favorable circumstances (rare) a raven can live for fifty years.

Shedd describes one other trait shared by ravens and crows. They both like golf balls. He's actually seen a raven fly to the top of a large dead tree and deposit a golf ball in the hollow of the broken top. Caching food is normal behavior for ravens (though not for crows), and he assumes this act was associated with the caching



behavior, even though they surely don't mistake golf balls for food. In fact, ravens have been known to disrupt golf matches by swooping down and making off with the balls in their strong beaks. Strangely enough, in the desert where I walk I often see the odd golf ball, so now I'm wondering if the ravens brought them. Of course, someone practicing a golf stroke may simply have knocked them there and decided not to pick them up, and I've yet to see a raven with a ball in its beak, but I'm going to watch more closely in the future. I'm curious to know if ravens have been storing golf balls in the saguaros or rolling them down the rodents' burrows for safekeeping.

