

Raven's intelligence, 'raven'ous appetite set him apart

by Bert Edises

Sentinel 30 April 1968

Among the Northwest Indians the story is told that Raven, a cross between a bird and a boy, seduced his grandmother and embarked on a life of trickery and depravity. We do not find it strange that a raven is the animal component of this story, because that large black bird is widely regarded as one of the most intelligent creatures known to man.

The ancient Germans considered the raven to be the symbol of wisdom, scorning the Greeks' choice of the owl. A contemporary naturalist reports that the raven seems to apply reasoning in situations new to it and that its "insight" behavior is at least equal to that of a dog.

The Biblical Noah must have thought highly of the raven's intelligence because when the Ark had been afloat for 40 days, he chose the raven from among all the other birds on the vessel for the important mission of seeing if the flood waters had subsided. Being a member of the crow family, the raven can be tamed

and taught to mimic human speech. In the Middle Ages this was accompanied by a sitting of the bird's tongue, on the theory that this improved his enunciation.

The cruel practice of tongue-sitting is no longer common. Investigation has shown that it adds nothing to the bird's linguistic abilities.

Though his intelligence is undeniable and he can be taught to talk, there is no record of the raven's having said anything worth remembering. Except, of course, the doleful "Nevermore" in Poe's immortal poem, "The Raven."

The raven is an omnivore, which means he will eat everything dead and anything living that's not too big for him to handle. He has an uncanny ability to find the most hidden animal corpses. He also eats a range of plant materials such as fruits and cereals.

Finally, he is mad about garbage dumps, where he gluttonizes voraciously. One writer claims

the raven's huge appetite has given us the term 'ravenous'.

How can the raven be distinguished from his cousin, the common crow? First, of course, by his much larger size. Tip of beak to tip of tail he measures about 26 inches, while his wingspread can be as much as 56 inches. The comparative measurements of the

qualities that human beings admire.

I have already spoken of their intelligence. Their nurturing habits also command our approval. Strange as it may seem, they keep their nest clean and comfortable for the young birds. They make and adjust the nest lining in accordance with the



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prevailing temperature, like a nursery matron adding or removing covers from a crib. They brood the young and give them water from their beaks. The female will even partly immerse herself in water and then "bathe" the young by applying her wet belly feathers to them.

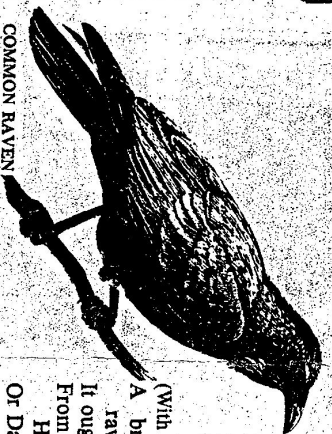
But the most spectacular of the raven's many talents is un-

doubtedly its flying ability. Visitors to the Grand Canyon are enthralled by the bird's extraordinary aerial maneuvers above the rims and over the canyon heights. With its fellows, it dives, sidesteps, circles, bellyrolls and even loops-the-loop, all seemingly with an eye cocked slyly toward spectators.

different ways: a croaking c-r-r-ruck; a metallic tok; a rough, deep-pitched knock; and in flight an occasional kloo-klok, which some bird lovers profess to find melodious.

Although at flying he equals or exceeds any member of the avian world, the same cannot be said of his singing. He is, in fact, our largest "songbird," but his music offers no threat to Mozart. Ornithologists render his song in

live in mountains, desert canyons, coastal cliffs and boreal forests, building its nests on cliffs, in niches in rocks, or in tall trees.



COMMON RAVEN

THE RAVEN

(With apologies to Edgar Allan Poe) A brainy bird, the common raven.

It ought to have a Ph.D. From Harvard, Princeton or New Haven Or Dartmouth, Yale, or M.I.T.