



WILDLIFE NOTES

RAVENS

Common Raven and Chihuahuan Raven

When early hunters came across the Bering Straits, they would have found ravens a familiar element, awaiting their share of the kills.

RANGE

No other bird has a wider distribution or shows more adaptability than the Common Raven, *Corvus corax*. They survive arctic winters and Death Valley summers. They range from the northern Arctic to deserts of North Africa; they can be found in Eurasia, in Mexico and Central America and across the United States.

The Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*) has a restricted range: the southwestern U.S. including southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Mexico; north-eastern Colorado; and portions of western Kansas and south-central Nebraska.

HABITAT

The larger Common Raven is often found in the wooded foothills, inter montane grasslands and forested mountains of the state, especially in regions with cliffs or ledges. The Chihuahuan Raven prefers more arid landscapes like deserts and mesquite grasslands. Common Ravens are abundant in the northern areas of New Mexico, Chihuahuan Ravens in the south.

DESCRIPTION

Common Ravens are the largest songbirds of North America; they weigh several times as much as much as American Crows. Adults are approximately 23-27

inches long and their wingspan doubles that. They weigh 2 to 3 ½ pounds. The feathers are uniformly glossy black. When perched, they have a noticeable 'dewlap' of shaggy feathers around the neck. The wings are long and pointed, the tail wedge-shaped. The beak, feet and heavy bill are black.

The Chihuahuan Raven is a similar but smaller bird. At 17-21 inches, it is slightly larger than a crow. An old name for the Chihuahuan Raven was White-necked Raven, but the white is only at the base of the neck (and breast) feathers and seldom visible in the field unless wind ruffles the feathers. *Cryptoleucus* means "hidden white"

Many people confuse crows with ravens. Crows are smaller, have squared-off or fan-shaped tails, and more slender bills. Ravens often soar, crows never do. If the bird does a barrel roll, it's definitely a raven. Crows caw; ravens croak and mutter. Raven voices are more varied and much deeper and throatier than the crow's monotonous nasal call.

BEHAVIOR

Both species are chiefly resident but may wander in winter or in response to food availability. Common Ravens are most often seen in pairs or flying singly; they are not as gregarious as either crows or Chihuahuan Ravens who will congregate into lively and garrulous crowds, especially in winter.

Both ravens are very acrobatic



TOP: Chihuahuan Raven showing white at base of neck feathers. Photo by Joe Woodley; www.woodley.ws

LOWER: Common Raven wings are long and pointed and the tail wedge-shaped. Photo courtesy of USNPS.

and quick flyers. They will cache surplus food in between rocks or crevices, or hide it under leaves or debris. They will also carry off shiny objects totally unfit for food and will stash them in their nests.

Can we squawk?

The specific name of the Common Raven, *corax*, is from Greek,

“croaker”. Raven is from Old Norse, “hrafn”, meaning to clear one’s throat. Ravens make over 30 distinct calls. Their complex range of vocalizations, from croaks and screams to semimusical warbles and metallic ‘tok’s, suggests they have a great deal to say to each other. A frequent vocalization of the Common Raven is a low croaking cr-r-r-u-u-k or prrruk. Chihuahuan ravens emit a harsh kraaack and have a slightly higher-pitched call.

Bird Brains

Ravens have the highest brain volume relative to body mass of the already-brainy Corvid family (crows, ravens, magpies). Experts place raven intelligence far above that of dogs. Ravens have demonstrated apparently insightful behavior and a capacity for abstract problem solving.

Ravens will call wolves and coyotes to prospective food sources so they can open up the carcass, making the meat accessible. They will also wait for birds with specialized foraging skills (herons and raptors), to make a catch then cunningly, utilizing cooperative tactics, seize the catch for themselves. In the laboratory, they can discern and work with numbers up to seven and are good at solving puzzles. Not surprising for a food stasher, they have good memories. As adolescents they’re insatiably curious, deconstructing anything that might conceal food.

DIET/FEEDING

The large powerful beaks of ravens allow them to eat most anything. Ravens do more than pick at the remains of dead animals. Ravens will eat everything from fur seals to french fries. As much as half of their diet can be live prey including insects and small vertebrates. They will also eat eggs, seeds, waste grain, berries and, of course, carrion. Ravens often hide surplus food, returning later to eat it. They also watch where other ravens hide

their food, then raid these caches.

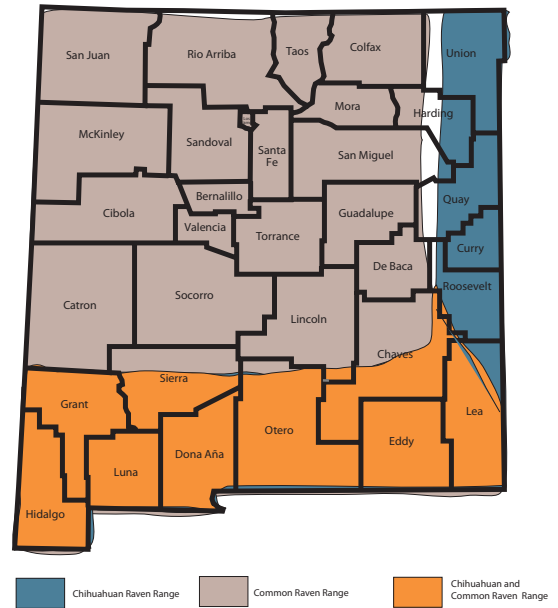
REPRODUCTION

Both species are monogamous, the pairs remaining together outside the breeding season and possibly for life.

Common Ravens typically breed in spring, building massive stick nests in inaccessible places like cliff tops, wind eroded shelter caves and infrequently in tall trees or powerpoles. Chihuahuan Ravens build in mesquite, catclaw, tall yuccas or even in old buildings. Female ravens will lay 4-8 eggs, which are greenish, blotched with brown. Both parents care for the young. Fledglings may remain with their parents for six months but form juvenile flocks in the fall.

CONSERVATION

Ravens have had their ups and downs. As settlement spread west, ravens initially declined until they were quite rare in certain parts of their range. Ravens may have been shot as vermin; the demise of large predators like the grizzly and the wolf may have reduced the availability of carcasses for scavenging. Today ravens are enjoying prosperous times as “subsidized predators”. Their populations are increasing across much of the west, most likely because they have learned to take advantage of human-related food sources: garbage, roadkill, and agricultural fields. Not all the populations have rebounded so dramatically. New England ravens were locally exterminated and only recently have begun to recover. The Common Raven is state- endangered



in Kentucky, state-threatened in Tennessee and is on the North Carolina Watch List as a “species rare to uncommon”.

The greatest danger ravens face is from humans. Even though ravens are protected through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, they have suffered much at the hands of varmint shooters. They are unfortunately viewed as pests, even though they prey on rodents, insects, carrion, and even noxious weed seeds. Many are hit by cars in urban areas.

Adult ravens have few predators, although larger hawks and owls take some. Brood losses result from starvation, adverse weather and predation by Raccoons, Great-horned Owls and other predators.

The stuff of tribal legends, Shakespeare’s plays and Poe’s most famous poem, ravens have been revered and reviled. For their beneficial roles in the ecosystem and for the joy their antics add to our lives, we should ensure that they are with us...evermore.

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