

American crow

Corvus brachyrhynchos By Julie Lue

As days grow warmer and snow recedes, exposing the detritus of winter, you're likely to find the American crow hard at work with the rest of nature's recycling crew. This large, dark, rowdy bird takes advantage of any available food source, whether it's a tattered deer carcass along a highway or a discarded french fry in a restaurant parking lot.

We may find little to admire about crows' foraging habits, especially when they rip open garbage bags or steal food off picnic tables. But in some ways the crow's survival strategy resembles ours. Instead of specializing in one particular food or habitat, it adapts to a wide variety of conditions by modifying its behavior, working cooperatively with other family members, and even using tools.

Crow or raven?

Both the crow and its cousin, the raven, are big, black birds with glossy feathers and raspy voices. The crow is smaller, has a slimmer, pointier beak, and is much more likely to travel in a flock (historically known as a murder). The raven is considerably larger—sometimes weighing twice as much as a crow—with a large, slightly curved bill and a necklace of shaggy feathers. It usually flies alone or in pairs.

From a distance, it's easiest to tell the difference by the shape of their tails in flight. A crow's tail appears somewhat squared-off or gently curved, like a fan. A raven's tail is longer and tapers to a point, like a wedge.

Also, crows usually live in towns, cities, and agricultural areas, avoiding the desert and mountain domains of the raven.

Family life

Crows enjoy an active family life. They can breed at age two but often stay with their families for up to five years. They help raise younger brothers and sisters while continuing to learn from their parents. Later, they may return for visits when sick or hurt.

Julie Lue is a writer in Florence.

Crows mate for life and build a new nest each year in a conifer or other tall tree. The female lays three to nine eggs, which hatch in less than three weeks. After a month or so, because they haven't yet learned to fly, the young crows tumble out of the nest onto the ground. Young crows are about the same size as adults but have milky blue eyes. If you find a fledgling on the ground, leave it alone. Its family is likely nearby, ready to fend off predators during this especially vulnerable period.

Food

Roadkill provides the crow with much-needed fat and protein, but most of the bird's diet comes from fruit, earthworms, grubs, nuts, grain, garbage, and baby birds of other species.

Voice

Scientists have identified over 250 different crow calls, including clicks, caws, rattles, and coos. Crows use a softer, gentler-sounding dialect when communicating closely with family members.

The raven, also an accomplished vocalist, often relies on a long, drawn-out croak that makes it sound like a crow with a sore throat.

Both species can mimic human speech.

Range

In Montana, crows live year-round in all but the northeastern corner of the state, which they abandon in winter for points south.

Intelligence

The crow's use of different food sources and habitats, along with its complex social life, has required it to develop an impressive brain. Scientists often compare the crow's intelligence to that of chimps or dolphins.



Scientific name

Corvus is the Latin word for "crow" and *brachyrhynchos* is Greek for "short-billed."

Inquisitive and adaptable, crows use their wits to procure food in unconventional ways. They can fish insect larvae out of holes with sticks, drop nuts on hard surfaces to crack the shells, and work as a team to steal food from distracted dogs.

Crows also apply their intelligence to identify and communicate threats. If you annoy a crow, it can recognize your face and your car, memorize your schedule, and even bring in reinforcements to harass you. When a crow dies, other crows hold a "funeral." A flock gathers around the body, observes for a while, then flies away, perhaps after learning another lesson about dangers to crows.

Conservation status

Like rats, squirrels, and white-tailed deer, crows do well around people. Their numbers worldwide have steadily increased alongside growing human populations and expanding urbanization. In the eastern United States, crows suffered heavy losses from West Nile virus, a mosquito-borne disease that arrived in this country in 1999. Initially the virus killed nearly 100 percent of the crows it infected. But as it spread westward, the disease became less lethal to crows.

In Montana, crow populations are considered healthy and at no risk. 🐦