



American crow

# *a soft spot for* **CROWS**

## Intelligent, friendly and regal, the crow family deserves a little love from birders.

By David Shaw

Crows are probably the most ignored bird species in North America. They are often viewed as pests, or at the very least as untrustworthy. Even the term for a group of crows, a “murder,” hardly creates positive associations. Yet these birds are everywhere. They are as common, and perhaps as despised, as pigeons. But there’s a lot more to the crow family than most people think.

### It Runs in the Family

The United States has four resident species of crows. The most abundant and widespread is the American crow, which lives across most of the lower 48 and southern Canada.

The slightly smaller northwestern crow has a nasal voice and occurs only along the coasts of the Pacific Northwest from Puget Sound to south central Alaska.

The fish crow is similar in size and voice to the northwestern crow but lives on the Atlantic coast and the lower Mississippi River region.

And finally there is the Hawaiian crow, which, as the name implies, occurs only in Hawaii, and there only

in a small area of forest. (A fifth species, the tarnaulipas, dwells in northern Mexico and is sometimes seen in Texas’ lower Rio Grande valley. But it doesn’t appear to breed north of the border, so it’s not considered a true U.S. resident.)

I don’t remember my first sighting of a crow, though I suspect I was very young. Even after I’d developed as a birder, I’m still not sure when I first put that tick on my list. Strange, because for almost every other species I’ve seen, I can remember where I was, what the weather was like and who was with me. The crow? Nothing. Despite its abundance—or, more likely, because of it—I overlooked the crow, just as most people do.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, crows were mercilessly pursued. Killed as farm pests, they declined and quickly became wary of people. But rather than flee to remote parts of the country as most hunted species did, crows found safety in cities and towns.

It seems odd, but this is a perfect example of the species’ discerning intelligence. Humans, they learned, will not shoot guns in a city. And food? Well, it’s everywhere! Garbage bins, dumps, picnic areas, parks and backyards were all-you-can-eat buffets to the newly arrived crows. They thrived, and continue to thrive, in our most populous areas.

### Secret Intelligence

Now I have a greater appreciation for crows than ever, even though I live in one of the few parts of the country where there are no crows at all! Here in interior Alaska, crows are replaced entirely by their larger cousins, ravens. So crows are a novelty to me. When I travel to southern Alaska or to the lower 48, I look forward to watching them. Their antics are remarkable. Much like puppies, or even people, they are constantly at play—tussling in the air, feigning attacks and learning as they do.

In recent studies of northwestern crows, researchers from the University of Washington have determined that the species is capable not just of recognizing humans individually, but also of teaching their offspring which humans are dangerous.



Northwestern crow

AMERICAN CROW: MARGARET WILSON/BLAZE; NORTHWESTERN CROWS: GREGG LABILEY / K&S PRODUCTIONS

The study went something like this. A biologist wearing a distinctive mask provided an unpleasant experience to adult crows by capturing, banding and measuring them. Later, when the masked researcher walked below the nest, the banded adults gave alarm calls and dive-bombed the human.

Their chicks, while never experiencing the negative associations for themselves, carried the fear and aggression toward the masked human—but not other humans—into their own adulthood. In short, they were taught to beware not of humans in general, but of one human in particular.

### A Different Point of View


This study, while fascinating, is only one example of how crows are capable of reasoning and solving problems in their environment. When I moved to Olympia, Washington, to attend college, I was intrigued by the many shells of clams and mussels along the roadsides and sidewalks of town. I couldn't for the life of me figure out how they had gotten from the beach, a few hundred yards away, to the pavement in such large numbers.

Then, one day, birding along the Olympia waterfront, I paused to watch a pair of crows foraging on the gravel beach. They were probing around

the rocks with their long black bills when one popped up holding a small mussel. The bird flew into the misty air and passed over my head toward a nearby parking lot.

Through my binoculars I watched as the crow hovered 20 feet above the pavement and let go of the mussel. It fell onto the concrete and shattered. The crow settled to the ground and pulled the tasty morsel from inside the broken shell. A moment later the bird was back on the beach searching for more, and my mystery was solved.

This kind of discovery makes birding in our own backyards—and city streets—fascinating. Even with our most common and unappreciated species, there are things to learn.

The crow is much more than a noisy pest. Catch one perched in the sunlight, and its feathers will glitter with an iridescent sheen. Then watch as it inspects the world through dark, intelligent eyes. There's more going on behind those eyes than you might suspect. Observe for a few moments, or hours, and you're sure to learn something. So, too, will the crow. 



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## Interesting Facts About Crows

- Crows are a prominent part of the 1963 Alfred Hitchcock movie *The Birds*. Animal trainer Ray Berwick used several crows in the film, in part because the birds were easy to train.
- Jays and mockingbirds are not the only mimics in the birding world. Crows can mimic several animal sounds.
- Some scientific studies have indicated that crows know how to count.
- Though they are related, crows and ravens are different birds. They look alike, but on average, ravens are several inches larger.
- Crows can always be picked out by their familiar caw-caw.
- Crows are very social birds and will congregate in large numbers to sleep. It's common to find roosts with several hundred crows, or even thousands.
- As omnivorous birds, crows will consume almost anything edible.
- The oldest recorded wild American crow was 16, and a captive one in New York lived to be 59.
- West Nile virus has been hard on crows. They die within a week of infection. And while many people think crows infect humans with the disease, scientists have not found this to be true.

David Shaw lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, and looks forward to spotting crows when traveling.