

In My Backyard Crows or Ravens? When Buzzards are on Sabbitacal



Every Sunday for the last 26 years I have driven from Sanderson to Marfa to play the organ for St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Always when we drop down out of the mountains a few miles before Marfa we see the same thing, summer or winter...pairs of black birds flying down the highway, searching for carrion. I realized I didn't know if they were crows or ravens. I knew they weren't blackbirds because they were large, not as big as turkey vultures, but much larger than most birds we see. But, there they were, always a pair, working the highway together. Sometimes

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they were on the blacktop picking at carcasses, but would fly away or to the side when we came up, not like buzzards, which will hog the carcasses until the last second, then fly (or waddle) to get out of the way. I have hit buzzards before and had them fly by and throw up on the windshield, but crows/ravens seem smarter and know to get out of the way.

So...what are they, crows or ravens? I always like a good research question and that one fit the bill.

Crows and ravens are two different kinds of birds, although related. Crows generally are smaller than ravens, but unless they are side by side you can't judge very well. One thing I discovered is that ravens always travel in pairs and rarely in flocks. Crows, on the other hand, travel in flocks, which are called "murders" of crows. In medieval times crows were seen circling battlefields and hospitals, like the iconic buzzard circling a dead carcass. They became a harbinger of death and the term "murder" of crows reflected that.

Another distinguishing feature of crows and ravens is that when crows fly they flap their wings every few seconds. Ravens glide for long periods without flapping their wings.

Crows and ravens are known as passerine birds, meaning that when they stand,



three toes are forward and one toe is backward, enabling them to perch more easily on branches or wires.

There are four recognized species of crows: eastern crow, western crow, Florida crow and southern crow. They vary in size with the eastern being the largest and the southern being the smallest. They also vary in the size and length of their bills. Unlike other birds, crows have iridescent black feathers and its legs, feet and bill are black as well. Their size varies from 16 to 21 inches in length and the tail is fan-shaped. Another identifying factor is that ravens also have shaggy feathers around the throat and above the beak.

Crows are omnivorous and will feed on all types of invertebrates, scraps of human food, carrion, seeds, eggs and baby birds, and fish found stranded on the shore. They will also eat different kinds of grains. They have been known to eat mice, frogs, and other small animals. In colder periods they depend on nuts and acorns. Crows are unusual in that they are one of the few birds known to make tools to get their food.

Crows have a very distinctive call, moving their heads up and down as they cry "Caaw, Caaw, Caaw!" They can produce other sounds, including mimicking other birds or animals.

American crows extend from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and are found in Canada, in the Caribbean on Saint-Pierre and Miquelon islands, and through the south into Mexico.

Crows are paired for life and remain together in large families for many years, with younger birds assisting in raising the nestlings. They do not mature for two years and may stay with the parents four or five years.

The only serious predators of crows are great horned owls, red-tailed hawks, peregrine falcons and eagles. If they are not cautious when feeding on carrion they

may be taken by coyotes or bobcats, but that is unusual.

It is believed that there is a population of 31,000,000 American crows. They live up to seven years in the wild and up to thirty years in captivity.

The common or northern raven, with eight species, is the most widely distributed raven and found in most of the Northern Hemisphere.

It is also much larger than a

crow, being about 25 inches in length, with a lozenge-shaped tail, differentiating it from the crow and its fan-shaped tail. It has a wingspan from 45 to 51 inches. They may live up to 21 years in the wild.

Ravens are extremely intelligent and good at problem solving. Their intelligence has been noted by cultures throughout the ages and they have entered into cultural mythology as spirits or gods, especially in Scandinavia, the Celtic regions, and the countries of the extreme northern hemisphere.

One of the closest relatives of the common raven is the Chihuahuan raven found in the Southwest of the US, and found in our area.

Whereas, crows have a distinct "caw...caw...caw" call, the raven has a deeper, throatier croak. They have over thirty different sounds that they make, mostly communication to others in their group. They also can mimic sounds from the environment, including human speech. When I was a child there was a restaurant in Fort Stockton that had a caged raven that talked all the time.

Ravens have few predators, due to their size and ability to defend themselves. Mostly it is the young and eggs that are taken, by owls, martens, eagles, goshawks, red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons. Some mammals such as lynxes, cougars and coyotes have taken young birds, but the adults are great at defending their nests, as well as their territory and food resources. Ravens usually mate for life.

Ravens feed on human garbage, carrion, arthropods, plant materials such as cereal grains, as well as grasshoppers and other dead birds.

Ravens and crows are hard to differentiate, even if they are standing next to each other. We have both kinds in the Trans Pecos, and they are good at cleaning up our roads, even when the buzzards are on winter vacation in Mexico. We no longer think of them as harbingers of Death, just as other fascinating inhabitants of our beautiful desert.

And, what's in your backyard?

