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The Raven: Oracle of the High Peaks

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By R. Kelly Coffey

Growing up on the Blue Ridge, I frequently heard the strange call of a bird near the crest of the escarpment. The call had a watery, gargling sound. My grandfather identified the bird as a “rain-crow,” and often planned our farm work in response to the call. He explained that the cry of a rain-crow foretold rainfall within a few days.

Despite the popular name, the bird is the common raven (*Corvus corax*) and not a crow at all. Although related to crows and similar in appearance, ravens are a separate species and have an identity all their own. Perhaps because of their fascinating behavior, ravens have been prominent in literature, folklore, and historical events around the world.

Bouncing back

Ravens inhabit primarily the high latitudes of the globe, and high places of the southern mountains. They prefer large, open areas that allow them to soar on rising thermal currents. Although

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more widespread in the past, the bird's range on a modern North American map looks similar to that of so many plant species — prevalent in the northern tier of the continent, with a thin habitat along the peaks of the Appalachians. Their limited range today is the result of habitat loss due to massive timbering in the early 20th century, as well as attempts in the past to exterminate the birds because they were viewed as pests. Ravens, however, seem to be making a comeback, having adapted well to urban environments.

Ravens have no single, distinct call (unlike the familiar “caw-caw” of the crow). The variety of sounds they produce, in fact, rivals human speech; ranging from a clicking “tok-tok” to a gargling “rrrrock.” Another human-like characteristic is that they are generally monogamous, at least for a single breeding season. Although the evidence is not conclusive, some experts suspect that ravens mate for life. Thus, ravens normally are not found in flocks, and tend to be territorial. After breeding, the female incubates the eggs while the male brings food to her, with both parents caring for the chicks after they hatch.

In flight, ravens can be distinguished from crows by their wedged-shaped tail, finger-like wing feathers, and the fact that they tend to glide more than crows. In addition, ravens have ruffled neck feathers and bulky beaks. Like crows, ravens are scavengers- eating almost anything, from berries to carrion.

Avian airshow

During a recent hike to the top of Grandfather Mountain, I pulled myself to the uppermost ridge and felt as if I had come upon an avian version of a fighter jet airshow. Ravens were playfully diving, squawking loudly, and zooming past each other as they flew in opposite directions. Playful behavior is quite common among ravens — some have been observed flying upside down, tumbling in mid-air, and hanging upside down from tree perches. Despite their often nonsensical behavior, ravens are

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considered to be highly intelligent. Studies of ravens indicate that the birds have the ability to solve relatively complex problems (such as accessing food not within reach) at their first attempt without having first gone through a trial-&-error period. Although ravens' ability to reason is highly debatable, no one doubts that the birds rank among the smartest creatures.


Quoth the raven

The Appalachian folk belief that the call of a raven portends rainy weather is just one example of how the presence of a raven allegedly is an omen; not only of bad luck as its dark figure might imply, but of favorable events as well. Throughout history, across many cultures, and in literature the raven is something of a seer: scouting for dry ground for Noah, feeding Elijah in the desert, foretelling the death of Alexander the Great, and, of course, emphatically informing Edgar Allan Poe that he would nevermore see Lenore. Sam Houston saw it as his "bird of destiny." A raven fell dead at his feet immediately before his disastrous marriage. He claimed one also led him to live among the Cherokee, who referred to Houston as "The Raven." Upon seeing a raven fly numerous times in the direction of Texas, he felt called to follow it. Thus, the formation of Texas and related events in American history could be said to hinge on one man's belief in a raven oracle.

Many animals, such as the eagle and wolf, figure prominently in myths and legends due to their exceptional dignity, beauty, or size. The unassuming raven, at first glance, appears to be an unlikely candidate to deliver prophetic messages. But over the centuries the raven has worked its way into folklore perhaps because of its high intelligence, unusual behavior, and its somewhat mysterious ability to command our attention.

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