

# FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE\_\_

## A MURDER OF CROWS

By Marjorie W. Rines

On April 1, 1999, I was taking an early spring walk though Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge when the social chatter of the crows escalated to the shrieking that indicates the mobbing of a raptor. The tone was an hysterical pitch that almost invariably means a Great Horned Owl, a species for which crows seem to hold a special animosity. Only twice have I been fooled by this sound, and in both instances the mobbing victim was a Red-tailed Hawk that had killed a crow.

As I got closer, I saw over a hundred crows in the trees, and at least a dozen others on the ground, but no owl and no hawk was present. In the center of the controversy were two crows with their claws locked together, apparently engaged in conflict. The nearest crows were sporadically engaging in the fray, pecking at both combatants, and occasionally actually trying to pull out wing feathers. The two combatants themselves engaged in only sporadic skirmishing and appeared to be tired.

A fight between two crows would not have surprised me, but the involvement of well over one hundred other individuals as spectators was reminiscent of a schoolyard brawl, not behavior I had seen before in crows.

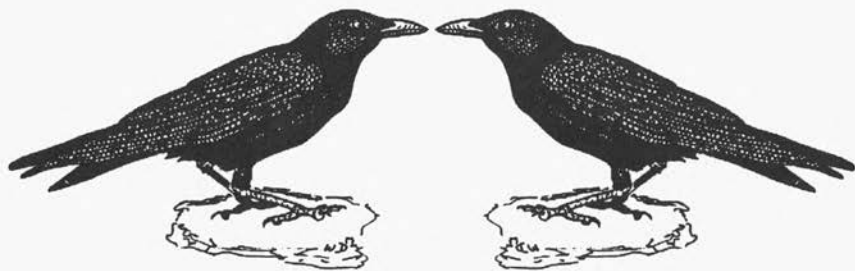
I watched for about five minutes, but when I moved closer for a better view, the group disbanded, and flew off. The two fighters did not appear to have sustained serious damage, and they both flew off in a normal manner. I puzzled over this behavior for about ten minutes, at which point the crows regrouped and began the shrieking again. When I approached, there was only a single crow on the ground, with an injured foot and wing. There were several small feathers in its bill, and I suspected it was one of the original combatants. Many of the other crows had neared the injured bird, but none were molesting it, and their intention was unclear. It is possible that they had been molesting it, but had flushed at my approach.

I watched for a minute or so, and was surprised when a Red-tailed Hawk flew in and perched in a tree containing no fewer than thirty crows. There was no change in the din that the crows were making, nor did any of them appear interested in mobbing the hawk. The Red-tail was definitely interested in the injured bird, though, and after a few moments flew in to a closer tree.

At this point, another birder arrived to see what the commotion was about, and when I explained the situation, we flushed the crow under a bush, and as we were doing so, the crows and hawk disbanded.

It was a puzzling experience. The "schoolyard brawl," with the crows forming a mob to watch two other crows fighting, could be explained, perhaps, by their wish to be on hand should one of the combatants die (crows are particularly fond of a free lunch, and it is not uncommon to see living crows picking over one of their road-killed brethren). Their disregard of the hawk is also strange, but crows do occasionally ignore hawks; in this case, it seems that their fascination with the combatants outweighed their instinctive dislike for birds of prey.

The most puzzling aspect of this experience was why a Red-tailed Hawk would choose to join a flock of crows engaging in what appeared to be mobbing behavior. Could the hawk have suspected the presence of a Great Horned Owl, as I had? Did it recognize the sounds of crows watching an injured bird and hope for easy pickings? In either case, it would appear that this hawk was able to recognize and respond to the language of crows — in the same manner in which human birdwatchers do.



## 100<sup>th</sup> CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Birders of all skill levels are encouraged to participate in the 100th CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT, sponsored by the National Audubon Society and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Thirty-three count circles are located entirely or partly within Massachusetts. Dates for some counts were not available for inclusion in this list. If you want to participate in a count, please make contact with the compilers at least one week before it takes place.

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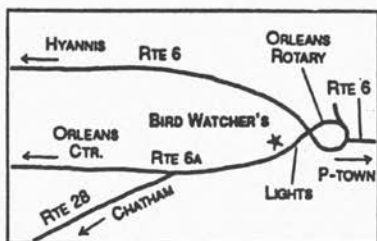
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