

ABOUT THE COVER

American Crow

It is said that if you only know three birds, one of them will be the American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). This curious and intelligent bird is behaviorally plastic, widespread, common, and has perhaps elicited more love and hatred than any other North American bird. They have made beloved pets that can be taught to mimic human speech – a greater-Boston resident raised one that sent the words *golf ball!* ringing through the neighborhood. And they have been the bane of the farmer, in some areas becoming severe agricultural pests. Their proclivity to winter roosts of thousands or even millions of birds has sent sanitation departments reeling. They have been persecuted by humans for centuries, typified by the destruction of several hundred thousand crows in the dynamite bombing of a winter roost in Illinois. Yet they are very wary where they are persecuted, place sentinels to warn foraging flocks, generally outwit humans, grow fat on roadkills, garbage, and grain, and have managed, despite persecution, to increase in numbers since the arrival of Europeans. They are behaviorally interesting since they are one of the few birds that commonly exhibit play, with yearling crows playing tug-of-war with sticks, swinging upside-down from Spanish moss, toying with a raccoon skull, and provoking larger animals such as wild turkeys by pulling their tail feathers. Adults commonly perform the enigmatic behavior known as “anting,” where they rub individual ants clasped in their beaks among their feathers, or wallow on ant hills, probably to gain some benefit from the formic acid secreted by the ants.

The American Crow is a large, all-black bird with comparatively wide wings and short tail. It can best be separated from the Fish Crow by the latter's smaller size (if the two crow species are together) and distinctive nasal *caah*. They are separated from the Northwestern Crow by range. As many as four subspecies are recognized, and some taxonomists consider the Northwestern Crow to be a race of the American Crow.

American Crows range from southern British Columbia across southern Canada to Newfoundland, and range across the entire United States. Southern populations tend to be sedentary, while northern crows are migratory, with some migrating several thousand miles. The largest concentrations of crows occur where northern migratory crows winter in areas with sedentary populations. In Massachusetts, American Crows are common residents and sometimes abundant migrants. In fall, family groups join other families and flocks of nonbreeding “floaters” that eventually may lead to the formation of a winter roost containing a million birds or more. In typical roosts, crows follow flightlines that lead to staging areas, where they noisily mill about prior to settling into the nighttime roost.

Crows are monogamous, producing a single brood in the north and sometimes two broods in the south. They prefer open parkland, woodlands, and agricultural land with woodlots. American Crows are territorial during breeding and practice

cooperative breeding, where several of the offspring from the previous breeding season remain with the parents and help in nest building, feeding the incubating female, and feeding the young. This delayed dispersal doubtless aids the young helpers at the nest to learn and practice social skills that may lead to improved nesting success in future years.

American Crows have a broad repertoire of calls and can mimic other bird species, e.g., Barred Owls. Their repertoire includes a spectrum of *caw*, *coh*, *caas* and growling sounds. Females utter *g-wong* to their mates. Territorial displays include serial grappling and rushes at other crows, calling *kr-aack!* Courtship displays include bowing and bobbing with tail and wings slightly spread, accompanied by rattling calls. Crows usually nest near the tops of large pine trees and sometimes oaks, with the nest placed in a branch fork, often near the trunk. The nest is a two-foot diameter platform of sticks lined with bark, grass, moss, or feathers. The female does most of the nest building with sticks brought in by helpers and presumably her mate. The usual clutch is 4-5 bluish-green brown-spotted eggs. The female does all the incubation that lasts 18-19 days, and is fed by her mate and helpers. Fledging occurs in 5-6 weeks, and the family stays together throughout the winter season.

American Crows are omnivorous, taking a broad spectrum of plant and animal food. They are intelligent, opportunistic foragers, often foraging cooperatively. For example, they have been observed foraging in cabbage palms with one or two birds beating the leaf stalks at the top of the palm and the remaining crows on the ground, bills pointed upward, waiting for whatever the stalk-pounders stir up or drop. They have been recorded eating large insects, spiders, frogs, snakes, small birds, catfish, salamanders, berries, and picking lice from hogs and cattle. They turn over cowpats to search for insects, and will drop shellfish to break the shells. They scavenge garbage cans and use hogs as "beaters," standing near the head of a foraging hog and taking insects that are startled into activity. They are also kleptoparasitic, stealing prey from White Ibises. They cache food in bark crevices and holes. Like raptors, they eject pellets of indigestible materials. One of their main sources of food is roadkills, prompting the wonderful Gary Larson cartoon which shows a crow dreaming about a steamrollered elephant. Their diet includes an equally eclectic spectrum of plant materials and scavenged agricultural crops, including wheat and corn.

American Crows are subject to nest predation by raccoons, and even adults fall prey to Great-horned Owls and Northern Goshawks. But their greatest persecutor is man. Sport hunting and retaliation by farmers still persists. But crows are wary, nervous, and suspicious and will quickly desert a food source if it is poisoned. Ironically, former urban garbage dumps and plentiful roadkills have helped the crow increase in numbers, and into the indefinite future the cawing crow will be part of our landscape. 🦉

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist

When I look at a wildlife or nature subject, I don't see feathers, fur, scapulars, or tail coverts . . . none of that. I see exciting shapes, color combinations, patterns, textures, fascinating behavior and endless possibilities for making interesting pictures.

Charley Harper reduces birds to the simplest possible visual terms without losing identity. He never counts feathers in the wings – just the wings. And he claims to be the only wildlife artist in America who has never been compared to Audubon.

Reared on a West Virginia farm, Harper developed an early appreciation and love of animals and an early awareness of design. He attended West Virginia Wesleyan College and graduated from the Cincinnati Art Academy, where he taught for many years. Gradually, Harper began to lose his interest in realism. "I felt fettered by the laws of perspective and shading and decided that the constant attempt to create the illusion of three dimensions on the two-dimensional plane of the drawing board was limiting to me as an artist." Harper's nature essays on each print are as prized as his non-verbal silk-screened prints. The artist-humorist-naturalist is a highly popular speaker and writer.

Harper and his fellow artists, wife Edie and son Brett, make their home in Cincinnati. 🦋

The Longevity of Waterbirds



STEVE MIRICK



PHIL BROWN

This autumn two old friends returned to Massachusetts. "The" Eared Grebe was spotted for the seventh year at Niles Beach in Gloucester Harbor, and "the" Tufted Duck was back in Sterling in Worcester County for the eighth year. Wherever these individuals go for the summer, they clearly have no trouble finding their way back to the Bay State, the same ponds, or the same beach.