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A History of the Crow Roost at Cincinnati

by Frank Renfrow

Evening has returned. The heavens have already opened their twinkling eyes, although the orb of day has yet scarcely withdrawn itself from our view...Crows are flying towards their roosts...

—John James Audubon, from his account of fishing in the Ohio

The winter roosting behavior of the American crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* has been well documented in various sections of the United States, with numbers of over five million having been reported at a great roost in Kansas (Angell 1978). *Corvus* species from other temperate regions of the world are also known to form large roosts (Wilmore 1977).

Alexander Wilson's vivid description of crows flying to their roost, penned some 200 years ago, aptly describes what can still be witnessed in the Cincinnati area today:

About an hour before sunset, they are first observed flying, somewhat in Indian file, in one direction, at a short height above the tops of the trees, silent and steady, keeping the general curvature of the ground, continuing to pass sometimes till after sunset, so that the whole line of march would extend for many miles...Burns in a single line, has finely sketched it: The blackening trains of Crows to their repose.

In 1848 Joseph Longworth built a country home at Walnut Hills, at the time a suburb, but now an inner-city neighborhood of Cincinnati. He named the estate "Rookwood," due to the large number of crows that (in his word) "inhabited" the area. In 1880 his daughter, Maria Longworth Nichols, founded the Rookwood Pottery. Many years later she explained that "the Crows in an old dead elm tree had begun the Rookwood Pottery." Although the Pottery was originally located on Eastern Avenue near the Ohio River, it was later moved to the top of the hill at Mt. Adams (Peck 1968).

In 1891, Raymond W. Smith, the editor of Lebanon, Ohio's newspaper, *The Western Star*, wrote an account of the birds of Warren County. There he describes the daily movements of the crows:

In speaking of the crow as a resident, it should be stated that the crows to be seen in all parts of the county any winter day, return every evening to the great crow roost at Clifton, a suburb of Cincinnati. Every morning from November to March, they arrive in the vicinity of Lebanon about an hour after sun-rise. The day is spent searching for food along the numerous water-courses of the county, and about three o'clock in the afternoon they may be seen returning, in small flocks, to the Clifton roost. So, while during the day-time, in Winter, crows are more abundant than at any other time of the year, by five o'clock in the afternoon there is probably not a crow left in the county.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the crow roost seems to have split into two locations, possibly due to human disturbance and persecution. The noted Ohio naturalist and photographer Karl Maslowski remembers one roost near the mouth of the Great Miami, in Indiana just north of the Oxbow, in a grove of large

cottonwoods and soft maples. The other roost was at the mouth of the Little Miami (Kemsies and Randle 1953). These crows sometimes crossed the Ohio to roost in the wooded hills of Fort Thomas, Kentucky (Karl Maslowski, pers. comm.).

Sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century, the crow roost returned to urban Cincinnati. I lived in Clifton during the 1980s, and remember watching endless lines of crows passing from north to south. On occasion I would follow them to the roost, at the time at Liberty Hill, just west of Mt. Adams. Other years I have seen the roost shift to Walnut Hills, Clifton Heights, and even to the rooftop of the Cincinnati Library. In very cold weather they can be seen huddled en masse (possibly to conserve heat—see Bent 1946) on the asphalt parking lot just north of the Greyhound bus station. In recent years the roost has convened most often at Mt. Adams and Eden Park.

Now I watch the crows from the Kentucky side of the river. Many times I have counted up to 30,000, only to see countless more stream in from the north during the final minutes before sundown. At mid-winter 70,000 would probably be a reasonable estimate for the average size of the roost.

Before reaching the final roost, the crows form large staging parties at Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Evergreen Cemetery in Southgate, Kentucky and elsewhere, about an hour or so before sunset. By sunset at their roosting location, the crows have massed by the tens of thousands. A deafening roar arises from their assembly calls (Goodwin 1976), their combined effect being not unlike the “assembly calls” of their human neighbors amassed at a Cincinnati sports stadium.



In mid-February the Crow roosts are augmented by thousands of blackbirds returning from the south. For reasons unknown to me, the blackbirds roost apart from the crows in the fall, in recent years forming a large roost at Northern Kentucky University, some five miles south of Cincinnati. The NKU blackbird roost transforms into a considerable assemblage of starlings and robins during the winter. By mid-March the crow roost dwindles in size and gradually dissipates with the commencement of nesting activities.

Various theories have been proposed as to why crows form such massive roosts. The most likely theory concerns safety in numbers from predation by owls during

the night, when the crows are most vulnerable. Anyone who has observed the torment that a few dozen crows can wreak while mobbing an owl, can easily understand why an owl would not want to be anywhere near a vast assembly of crows. In addition, during cold winters when all other bodies of water are frozen over, the Ohio River can be the only source of open water, and a roost close by is advantageous. On occasion I have watched them congregate at the river at sunset, flying down to the banks to drink and bathe.

It was a strange coincidence that during this past winter, the crow roost seemed to center on the grounds of the old Rookwood Pottery. At the approach of nightfall one could witness crows swirling around the black rook statuettes on the old stone gateposts at the pottery entrance. The birds would then cluster in the bare tree beside the gate. In the gathering darkness one could scarcely distinguish between the rooks of cast metal and the crows of flesh and blood. I imagine that Maria Longworth Nichols would be pleased.



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Both photographs appearing in this article were taken by the author at the Rookwood Pottery crow roost.—Ed.