

## THE STATUS OF THE NORTHWESTERN CROW

By ALLAN BROOKS

Whether the Northwestern Crow (*Corvus caurinus*) is entitled to full specific rank has long been a matter of controversy among ornithologists. Mainly the difference in opinion has been between those who are familiar with it in life on the one side and on the other those whose verdicts are arbitrarily based on the evidence of the millimeter rule without regard to life characters.

The committee of the last A.O.U. Check-list decided that it is only a subspecies of *Corvus brachyrhynchos* without regard to the records of the many naturalists who have been familiar with it in the field during the last century. Nor have these arbiters conformed to the principle that any two forms that breed in the same area and keep distinct must be different species.

No! Because the measurements overlap, the birds must be conspecific. I have not measured a large series of each kind and so am not in a position to disprove that the measurements do overlap, but I might suggest that it would be easy for specimens of *brachyrhynchos* to be mixed with a series of *caurinus* and labeled as the latter species. In many localities the two species may be found together, not only on their feeding grounds in winter but also in a breeding area. I have seen both nesting in the same locality on Sumas Prairie, British Columbia, the same area where J. K. Lord found them in 1856, but unlike that somewhat erratic observer I could find no difference in the structure of their respective nests. This particular locality has since been completely altered in its physical characters; the two species may not be nesting together there at the present time.

The main distinction between these two crows, as recorded by many observers, is in their voices. The ordinary *caw* in the Northwestern Crow is of a higher pitch; in addition this species has a musical cackle, *wok-wok-wok-wok*, which I have never heard from *brachyrhynchos*. This cackle is not a song note but a flock call, usually heard as the straggling flocks are following some line of movement. It appears to be a rallying call to keep individuals in touch with each other. A somewhat similar call may be heard in the spring as uttered by the American Crow, but this is more of a gurgle—a song in fact. But what has impressed me more than any voice distinction are the actions of the Northwestern Crow; it has a different personality. These crows are more sociable and are governed by the community instinct. A flock may be feeding on the shore, when suddenly they launch themselves into the air in a compact group, not with any idea of changing their location but as shore birds do, tacking about in varied maneuvers to return as a unit to their original feeding ground. These erratic flights may even occur at their nesting grounds; their nesting is far more of a colony affair than is the case with the American Crow.

Lastly, the wing-beat is much faster. Several times I have mistaken a compact flock of Northwestern Crows for a flock of Band-tailed or domestic pigeons; this will give an idea of the speed they can put into their wing-beat. Of course this varies with the purpose of the birds; it is not especially fast when they are loafing.

Over and over again I have been struck by the similarity of their actions to those of the Old World Jackdaw. There is the same quick and united action, seemingly in response to the direction of a leader, coupled with a general playful tendency.

My acquaintance with the eastern Fish Crow is confined to their actions in the nesting season. I do not recollect any outstanding similarity; the eastern bird as I remember it seems to have a longer wing in proportion to its smaller size. I mention

this as one authority has made *caurinus* a subspecies of *ossifragus*. The rapid wing-beat of *caurinus* may be co-ordinated with a difference in the relative length of the wing bones. This is worth verifying.

The range of the Western Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos hesperis*), as given in the last A.O.U. Check-list (1931) is quite wrong. It does not start from "Central British Columbia" but from the southwestern portion of the Province. This form is of regular occurrence on Vancouver Island, although its nesting there has yet to be proved.

History repeats itself; in my fight for the recognition of the specific distinctness of *Corvus caurinus* I am reminded of a similar controversy far back in the last century between my father, the late W. E. Brooks and my paternal sponsor, the late Allan Hume in the pages of the latter's "Stray Feathers." The controversy concerned the separation of the Hill Crow, *Corvus intermedius*, from the Jungle Crow, *C. culminatus*; my father insisted that their voices were quite distinct but Hume would clinch his argument for their identity with the claim that as the skins could not talk the birds could not be separated. This is the difficulty with all crows of uniform coloration, but the classic corvine controversy, the specific separation of the Carrion and Hooded crows of the Old World, hinges not on a difference in voice, as their voices are the same, but on their very distinct coloration. It is now admitted by a number of persons that each is entitled to specific rank in spite of the fact that where their ranges overlap they interbreed freely and produce fertile offspring.

*Okanagan Landing, British Columbia, March 6, 1942.*