

The Common Raven returns to Kentucky



The raven is a wary species that prefers nesting in remote mountainous areas. Photo/H. Cruickshank.

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THE RANGE OF THE COMMON Raven (*Corvus corax*) once extended as far south along the Cumberland Plateau as Winston County, Alabama (Howell 1910). However, by the early 1900s the species had been extirpated from this portion of its range and the disjunct population extending down the southern Appalachian Mountains to the east had been greatly reduced (Alsop 1979, Hooper *et al.* 1975).

Mengel (1949) presented evidence for the historical nesting of ravens along the Rockcastle River drainage in Laurel and Pulaski counties and along the Red River in Powell, Wolfe, Estill, and Menifce

After an absence of sixty years, the Common Raven has been found nesting in Pine Mountain

counties of Kentucky. Mengel also believed that ravens nested along the Rock Creek Gorge in McCreary and Wayne counties. However, he stated: "In the strictest ornithological sense, there is not a single authentic record of the raven from Kentucky. No competent ornithologist has, to my knowledge, observed any in the state, nor does there appear to be an extant specimen. Nevertheless, after ten years of intermittent fieldwork in some 20 counties of eastern Kentucky, I am confident that the raven occurred in a considerable portion of the eastern section of the state, and that it disappeared relatively recently, if it is in fact, entirely

gone." He listed a tentative date of 1935 for the extirpation of the raven in Kentucky.

Ravens were not sighted again until Croft (1970) observed three ravens in an extensively forested portion of Kentucky during the summer of 1969. Croft declined to give the exact location of the sightings because of the precarious status of the raven in the state. In 1976, ravens were sighted on the Kentucky side of Cumberland Mountain in Bell County (Hall 1976). On March 22, 1978, Smith and Davis (1979) observed a raven below the ridge trail between Sand Cave and White Rocks within the rugged Cumberland Gap National Park (Harlan County) and heard of two other raven sightings in the park. Davis *et al.* (1980) saw at least three different ravens at various points in the park the following year. These authors mention reports of raven sightings by other observers in the Hensley settlement section of the park as early as 1972. Recent raven sightings have also been reported on Big Black Mountain in Harlan County (Hall 1982), in Letcher County (Hall 1983), and in Breaks Interstate Park in Pike County (O'Quinn *et al.* 1983). It is clear from the increasing frequency of these sightings that a small population of Common Ravens is established in eastern Kentucky. However, to our knowledge no raven nests have yet been reported in the State. This paper describes the first Common Raven nest found along the eastern slope of Pine Mountain in Letcher County, Kentucky.

The raven nest site, located on a small ledge high on a rock face, was discovered in 1982 by John MacGregor. MacGregor observed a raven in the immediate vicinity but was unable to scale the cliff and could not ascertain if the nest contained eggs or young ravens. The authors inspected the site March 12 and April 10, 1984.

On approaching the nesting cliff (elevation 762 meters) during the March 12 visit, the party observed two ravens in the immediate vicinity. After scanning the sandstone cliff with binoculars, three large stick nests approximately 1 meter in diameter were observed on rock ledges with a southern exposure situated 17 meters high. These nests were protected from precipitation by an overhang of approximately 10 meters. One nest appeared to have been recently made, while the weathered appearance of the other nests suggested construction in previous years. Abundant fecal whitewash on the

rock face below the nests attested to recent and frequent use of the site. On this initial trip, we were not able to see inside the nest.

On April 10, 1984, we returned to the nest site. On approaching the nest cliff, we heard young ravens in the most recently made stick nest and an adult raven in the adjacent forest. Placing a 12 meter extension ladder on a tall hardwood tree at the base of the cliff, Fowler climbed to the top and observed six young ravens in the nest through binoculars. Photographs of the young birds were obtained with a 35 mm camera equipped with a 80-200 mm zoom telephoto lens.

To our knowledge, this is the first active raven nest reported in Kentucky. Although the raven is a wary species that nests primarily on cliff ledges located in remote mountainous areas (Harlow 1922, Murray 1949, Stupka 1963), it is highly unlikely that a remnant raven population managed to survive undetected in eastern Kentucky. It is more plausible that these birds expanded their range from Virginia or West Virginia southward through Breaks Interstate Park, with its numerous sandstone cliffs, and along Pine Mountain southward to Cumberland Gap National Park. Raven populations have recently been increasing in the mountain regions of both of these states (Hall 1977a, 1977b).

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