

THE CROW AND THE RAVEN IN EARLY WISCONSIN

BY A. W. SCHORGER

THE early writers on Wisconsin birds state that the Crow† was a comparatively rare bird while the Raven‡ was common. Settlement of the state produced a complete reversal, the Crow becoming very abundant and the Raven disappearing from the southern portion. While it is true that the Crow is seldom mentioned in the early accounts, this statement applies with almost equal force to the Raven. Both species have received only casual mention and the earliest records are easily overlooked.

Errors occur in the translations of the *Jesuit Relations* and other early French writings where *corbeau* appears indiscriminately as either Raven or Crow. In every case examined the French is *corbeau*. This criticism applies also to place names, such as Crow Wing River (*Aîle de Corbeau*). The only instance noted where Crow (*corneille*) was properly applied is mentioned by Schoolcraft¹ who was in Minnesota in 1820. A small stream called *Corneille* by the French flows into the Mississippi between Saint Anthony Falls and Crow Wing River.

The Crow was long known to the northern Indians. Schoolcraft mentions that the Chippewa name is *andaig*. W. W. Cooke², who spent three years among the Chippewas at White Earth, Minnesota, states that the Raven is called *ka-gog-i'* and the Crow *an-deg'*, meaning those that migrate, in contradistinction to the Raven which is a permanent resident. Schoolcraft³, in spite of his vigilance, is inconsistent. He makes the interesting observation that the Magpie occurs at Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, and translates the Chippewa name, *wabish kagagee*, as White Crow.

Perhaps the first mention of the Raven in Wisconsin is made by Perrot⁴. He visited the Mascoutin Indians at the site of modern Berlin, Wisconsin, in 1666, and relates that at a feast some Indians had the skins of Ravens with their feathers (*peaux de Corbeaux avec leur plumage*) attached to their girdles. Hennepin⁵, while coasting along the Wisconsin shore of Lake Michigan in October 1679, found a deer upon which Ravens and eagles were feeding. In keeping with tradition, the Raven is mentioned in connection with disaster. Marin⁶ in a letter dated May 11, 1730, describes his attack on the Fox Indians in their fort on Lake Winnebago. After the fifth day of battle, Ravens were seen to alight in the fort from which it was concluded that the enemy had departed. Rev. Cutting Marsh⁷ recorded in his journal on September 18, 1834, that one of the Stockbridge Indians had found at South Kaukauna a dead body marred beyond recognition by Ravens.

† *Corvus brachyrhynchos*.

‡ *Corvus corax*.

The Crow is not mentioned until well into the nineteenth century. The evidence for its presence and abundance is conflicting over a period of many years. This may be due to erratic distribution or to faulty observation. As late as 1905 Sayre⁸ wrote: "Forty years ago one never saw a crow in Wisconsin, and yet within but a year the supervisors of Rock County passed an ordinance to pay ten cents for each crow killed." Nevertheless, the Crow did occur throughout Wisconsin before the agriculture of the whites.

The Crow, according to Richardson and Swainson⁹, ranged to the fifty-fifth parallel of latitude as early as 1831. Schoolcraft¹⁰ found both the "Crow (*Corvus corone L.*)" and "Raven (*Corvus corax L.*)" in Minnesota in 1820. McKenney¹⁴ was on Madeline Island, Wisconsin, in late July, 1826, and wrote: "Tame crows appear common in this part of the world. I notice four here that fly after the family as if they were part of it and had never been wild." Crows were not confused with Ravens, for he mentions having seen the latter at the mouth of the Montreal River.

In 1823, Keating's²¹ party* travelled overland from Chicago to Prairie du Chien. "The Crow (*C. corone*)" was not encountered until the Wisconsin River was reached. This was the first heavily wooded area encountered, the significance of which will appear later. Mrs. Roseline Peck¹³, the first white woman to settle at Madison, mentions that in July 1837, some of her guests "shot my two little pet crows." This act is to be commended highly, as it is improbable otherwise that these Crows would have become historic. McLeod¹⁴ travelled through southern Wisconsin in the '40s and among the birds of the region mentions both the Crow and the Raven.

The contribution of Moses Barrett¹⁵ is particularly interesting, with respect to distribution. In the fall of 1850 he settled on the "Indian Lands" at Wautoma, then on the edge of the wilderness. Flocks of eight to ten Ravens were seen in winter and the species remained for two or three succeeding seasons. During this period numerous settlements were made and the Raven disappeared. A year or so later the first Crow arrived, soon followed by others. Barrett was of the opinion that the Fox River formed the boundary between the two species and that they would not intermingle. J. A. Allen¹⁶ immediately replied with the statement that in Dakota and Montana he found Crows and Ravens intermingling freely and even breeding in the same forests. On Madeline Island where Crows congregate by hundreds in autumn I have failed to observe any antagonism between the two species.

References become more numerous and scientific after 1850. Barry¹⁷, in his list of the birds of Wisconsin, states that the Raven is rare while

* This is known as Long's Second Expedition to which Thomas Say was attached as naturalist. Say was the first trained zoologist to travel in Wisconsin. He left but little information on the birds of the state due in part to the loss of many of his specimens in transit. I have been unable to trace any of his notebooks for this period.

only a few Crows have ever been seen in the state. Hoy¹⁸ considered the Crow one of the rarest birds at Racine and records that "it never takes up its quarters within fifteen or twenty miles of Lake Michigan." The Raven was more numerous, and resident. In a later paper Hoy¹⁹ states that the Crow was first seen by him at Racine in 1858 and that they began to nest in that section "about twenty years since," which would be about 1865. The Raven became scarce about 1850. R. M. Strong²⁰, writing in 1895, stated that thirty years earlier the Crow was considered by the old settlers to be a comparatively rare bird.

The curious conflict of opinion continues. Kennicott²¹ reported the Crow and Raven as common throughout the state of Illinois and stated that both species have been known to nest in Cook County. About twenty years later (1876) E. W. Nelson²² wrote that the Crow "is far from an abundant species in Northern Illinois, at any season or locality."

The report of King²³ on Wisconsin birds was based on field work done from 1873-7. He states that the Crow is common throughout the southern portion of the state and winters in considerable numbers. At that time the Crow was known to occur in the Mississippi valley as far north as New Richmond, Saint Croix County, but he had not observed it in the eastern portion of the state north of Stevens Point. However, at about this time Willard²⁴ reported the Crow as breeding near Green Bay while at the same time (1881-83) Grundtvig²⁵ found it common in migration, with a few nesting, in Outagamie County.

Reports on the wintering of Crows in the northern half of the state do not appear until about 1870. The statement of Kumlien and Hollister²⁶, made in 1903, that Crows do not winter in north and north-central Wisconsin requires modification. In the winter of 1872-3 they remained in unusual numbers at Prescott²⁷, as well as at New Richmond²⁸ in the winters of 1872-3 and 1875-6. In the winter of 1883-4 they remained in Fond du Lac County.²⁹

The small population of Crows in southern Wisconsin in the early days was due in large part to the presence of great areas of prairie. Elliott Coues³⁰ mentions that the Raven ranged more over the plains, while the Crow was "partial to the wooded river-bottoms, and the immediate vicinity of the water-courses." There is general agreement that the Crow, in both Wisconsin and Illinois, was a comparatively rare bird in the prairie regions until the latter were brought under cultivation. Agriculture not only provided more food but permitted the growth of forests previously prohibited by prairie fires.

It may be stated in general that the Crow was distributed sparsely in the state prior to 1855, became common in the southern portion by 1875, and abundant by 1890. The Raven began to disappear from the southern half of the state about 1850 and became a scarce winter visitor about 1865. Its rarity in extreme southern Wisconsin may be

judged by the fact that the last record known to Kumlien and Hollister²⁶ was the one shot at Lake Koshkonong in November 1891. In October, 1934, one was shot by duck hunters at Crystal Lake, Dane County, and subsequently recovered by Leonard Wing.³¹ At the present time the species is confined largely to the northern third of the state.

REFERENCES

1. H. R. SCHOOLCRAFT, "Summary Narrative of an Exploratory Expedition to the Sources of the Mississippi in 1820." Philadelphia (1855):145 and 150.
2. W. W. COOKE, *Auk*, 1 (1884):245.
3. H. R. SCHOOLCRAFT, *loc. cit.*:104.
4. NICHOLAS PERROT: in Bacqueville de La Potherie, "Histoire de l'Amerique Septentrionale." Paris, 2 (1753):116.
5. LOUIS HENNEPIN, "Nouvelle Decouverte." Utrecht (1697):156.
6. MARIN, *Coll. Wis. Hist. Soc.*, 17 (1906): 99.
7. CUTTING MARSH, *Coll. Wis. Hist. Soc.*, 15 (1900): 98.
8. DAVID F. SAYRE, "Early Life in Southern Wisconsin." *Wis. Mag. History*, 3 (1920): 420. (Prepared in 1905).
9. J. RICHARDSON and W. SWAINSON, "Fauna Boreali-Americana," 2 (1831): 291.
10. H. R. SCHOOLCRAFT, *loc. cit.*: 127, 130, and 414.
11. T. S. MCKENNEY, "Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes." Baltimore (1827):262 and 260.
12. W. H. KEATING, "Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River. Performed in the year 1823." 1 (1824):234.
13. ROSELINE PECK, *Coll. Wis. Hist. Soc.*, 6 (1872): 358.
14. DONALD MCLEOD, "History of Wisconsin," Buffalo (1846):143-4.
15. MOSES BARRETT, *Amer. Nat.*, 7 (1873): 693.
16. J. A. ALLEN, *Amer. Nat.*, 7 (1873): 743.
17. A. C. BARRY, *Proc. Boston Soc. Nat. His.*, 5 (1854): 7.
18. P. R. HOY, *Trans. Wis. State Agric. Soc.* for 1852, 2 (1853): 356.
19. P. R. HOY, *Proc. Wis. Nat. His. Soc.*, March, 1885:5.
20. R. M. STRONG, *Wilson Bull.*, 7, No. 5 (1895): 11.
21. R. KENNICOTT, *Trans. Ill. Agric. Soc.*, 1853-4, (1855): 585.
22. E. W. NELSON, "Birds of North-eastern Illinois." *Bull. Essex Institute*, 8 (1876):112.
23. F. H. KING, "Geology of Wisconsin," 1 (1883):553.
24. S. W. WILLARD, *Trans. Wis. Acad. Sci.*, 6 (1885): 185.
25. F. L. GRUNDTVIG, "On the Birds of Shiocton . . . Outagamie County, Wisconsin, 1881-83," *Trans. Wis. Acad. Sci.*, 10 (1895):121.
26. L. KUMLIEN and N. HOLLISTER, "The Birds of Wisconsin" (1903): 86.
27. *Ellsworth Herald*, Jan. 23, 1873.
28. *New Richmond Republican*, Jan. 20, 1874, and Feb. 23, 1876.
29. S.B.D., *Forest and Stream*, 22 (April 3, 1884): 184.
30. E. COUES, "Birds of the Northwest," (1874):207.
31. L. W. WING, *Auk*, 52 (1935): 455.

168 NORTH PROSPECT AVENUE, MADISON, WISCONSIN