

Docent Circle: Field Notes: Corvids



If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be Crows.

REV. HENRY WARD BEECHER, EARLY 1800'S



Crows, ravens and jays all belong to the family (*corvidae*) and live in many parts of the world *and* in the Laguna de Santa Rosa. They all have conspicuous personalities. Bold, active, noisy, and aggressive in nature, sometimes overly so, they have claimed our attention and have earned their place in legend and folklore.

Corvidae is in the order *Passeriformes* (perching birds), suborder *Passeres* and commonly acknowledged as the bird species with the highest intelligence. A raven trained by German Otto Koehler in the late 1940's could count to 6 or 7. Research teams in America have found that the crow tended to be faster on the uptake than dogs or cats. For example, one crow learned to watch a clock face, wait until both hands pointed to twelve, and operate a lever to get a reward of grain. *Corvids* have keen eyesight and the ability to concentrate.

Black, grey, brown and tan colors are found in raven/crow plumage, and are produced by pigments (melanin). The non-iridescent blue plumage of the jays contains no pigment, however. Instead the color is a purely structural effect of the colorless framework of feather barbs. In good light the raven's black plumage can be seen to have an iridescence, and crows show a greenish gloss. Their broad flat feathers overlap like the horizontal lath of mini blinds, giving the feathers a smooth, satin-like surface.



Corvids inhabit forests and grassland. Mostly omnivorous ground feeders and seldom finicky over their choice of food, they can survive in changing conditions and a variety of habitat. They are known for their habits of burying and hiding food, as well as breaking nuts and shells with their beaks while holding them with their feet. Many are predatory, and feed on carrion. Their sense of smell is not very developed, but they can smell food while it is in the mouth. This allows them to spit out tainted meat from carrion.

Mating entails a long continued courtship. The sexes look alike and are mostly monogamous. Family life is united and productive. *Corvidea* nestlings emerge from their shells poorly developed, except for the digestive system. They need constant feeding and grow quickly. The female will stay on the nest because the nestlings adopt the temperature of their surroundings and need continued warmth. The parents feed their young by regurgitating food from their food pouches. The food pouch is an area of folds on the lining of the esophagus, enabling the parent bird to carry food to the young. The nestling "gapes", or opens their beak wide to show off a bright pink interior. This is a stimulus to the parents to keep feeding the young. Adult *corvids* are literally on call to provide nourishment. Several *corvids*, including crows and scrub jays, actually have helpers at the nest. These could be yearlings, mostly females of the breeding pair, to help provide for the nestlings. In exchange for this help, they are able to pick up on some good education and are also privileged to the parent's territory. Most crows, ravens and jays are raised in nuclear families. Social life of mom, dad and the kids during the day, but at night any adult that is not tied to a nest may move and settle for a night in other adult *corvids* roosts.



These creatures closely watch the territory they live in. Watching humans and talking to us with the many chilling caws, crowing and squawking in hopes of making their home more to their liking. In the field, the ravens and crows seem almost identical when trying to identify. However, ravens are much larger and have pointed tail feathers, while the crow's tail is straight.

Raven or Crow – how do you know? Use hand motions (V --) with children to help them remember the difference between the tail feathers of ravens and crows.