

# NATURE DETECTIVES

Winter 2004

## Resourceful Ravens and their Relatives

A scientist studying ravens saw the birds cleverly get meat hanging below them on a long string. They pulled on the string with their bills and used their feet to hold the string as they hauled it up. Some other ravens stole a fisherman's catch the same way. The fish were still on the fishing lines in the water! Ravens, along with crows and jays, are members of the bird family called *Corvidae*. For simplicity, we call them corvids. Corvids are brainy birds.

### Corvid Tales

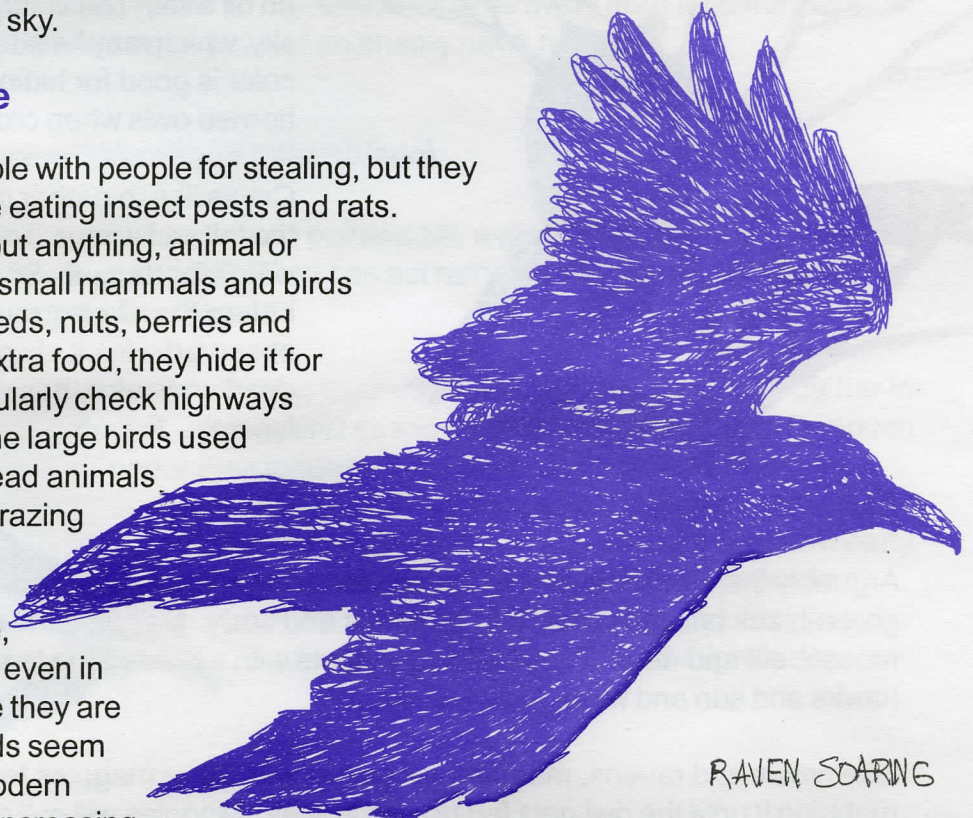
Maybe because corvids are clever, people from all different places, living long ago until today, put the birds in their folktales and myths. A very old Norse myth tells of Odin, the powerful ruler of all the gods, who had a raven on each shoulder. One raven was Memory and the other was Thought. Each day Odin sent the two ravens out to the ends of the earth to find out all there was to know. The ravens returned each evening and whispered the world's secrets in Odin's ears.

Plains Indian tales often feature raven as the bearer of news or good luck. Tribes in northwest North America have many stories about raven. Raven is a trickster who stole the sun, but his antics also put the sun in the sky.

### No Fussy Eaters Here

Even real ravens get in trouble with people for stealing, but they also do beneficial things like eating insect pests and rats. Most corvids will eat just about anything, animal or vegetable. Corvids prey on small mammals and birds and their eggs. They eat seeds, nuts, berries and grains. When corvids find extra food, they hide it for later. Crows and ravens regularly check highways for road kill, much the way the large birds used to follow bison looking for dead animals or insects stirred up by the grazing herd.

Because of their intelligence, corvids can readily find food even in new situations, and because they are not fussy eaters, most corvids seem to be getting along fine in modern America. In fact, crows are increasing in number in many cities where they raid garbage cans and dumpsters.



RAVEN SOARING



## Raven (*Corvus corax*)

Ravens tend to be wilder than crows, staying farther from large cities. They have the same glossy-black coloring as crows, but are about four times heavier. In flight, their pointed wings measure four feet from tip to tip. They are acrobatic fliers performing dives and rolls in breath-taking sequence then soaring to great heights making flying look fun.

Ravens have been called the smartest and most adaptable birds. Their intelligence has been compared to dogs and dolphins. They are observant and curious. One raven playfully slides down snow banks; another boldly pulls a dog's tail. Groups of young ravens will let other ravens know if they find food to share. Some people say they have seen ravens lead wolves to prey animals so they can share the meat. Stories tell of ravens leading human hunters as well. Certainly ravens follow hunters such as wolves, bears and coyotes to glean any leavings. Ravens gobble their food, and anything such as fur that isn't digested is puked up in a bundle just like owl pellets.

Ravens wait until they are at least three years old to find a mate, and pairs stay together for life, which may be forty years. The males and females look alike, which is true for all corvids. Their main enemy is people, but they also watch out for pine martens and birds like hawks, eagles and owls.



## American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Crows are jet-black with an iridescent sheen like an oil slick. The color shows up well against the sky, which may help them find each other, yet the color is good for hiding from enemies like great horned owls when crows are sleeping at night.

Crows like to gather in large groups especially in the fall and winter. They have sentry crows that watch for danger. Scout crows explore an area before the whole group flies there. People have observed a flock of crows silently gather around a dead crow as if they were holding a kind of crow funeral.

## Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*)

Arguably the most beautiful of our corvids is the magpie with its black head and long metallic green-black tail and vivid white on wings and body. Magpies will eat ticks off the backs of moose, elk and deer. They build stick nests with a domed top to protect their babies from hawks and sun and wind.

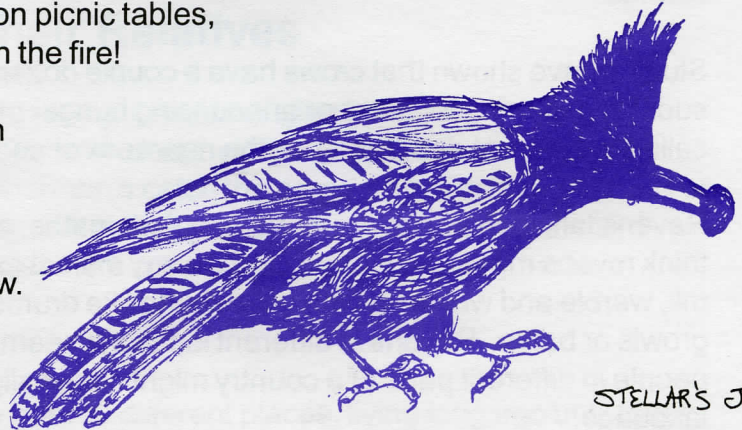
Like crows and ravens, magpies will gather with other magpies to scold a great horned owl, mobbing it until the owl gets fed up and leaves. Magpies will call others to form a very noisy group around a dead magpie. One or two at a time fly down to the dead bird, all the while chattering loudly.



### Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*)

This mountain dweller has a small bill compared to its relatives. With a rounded head and fluffy pale gray feathers for warmth, it looks soft, almost like a stuffed toy. The soft feathers make it the quietest flier of the corvids. Gray jays are notorious thieves and have earned the nickname "camp robber" from boldly stealing food on picnic tables, from inside tents, and even from a pan on the fire!

Gray jays start nesting in late winter when there is little food available so they must hide or cache food for their babies in the fall. They have special sticky saliva they use to glue tidbits in trees above the snow. Winter temperatures keep the food from spoiling.



### Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*)

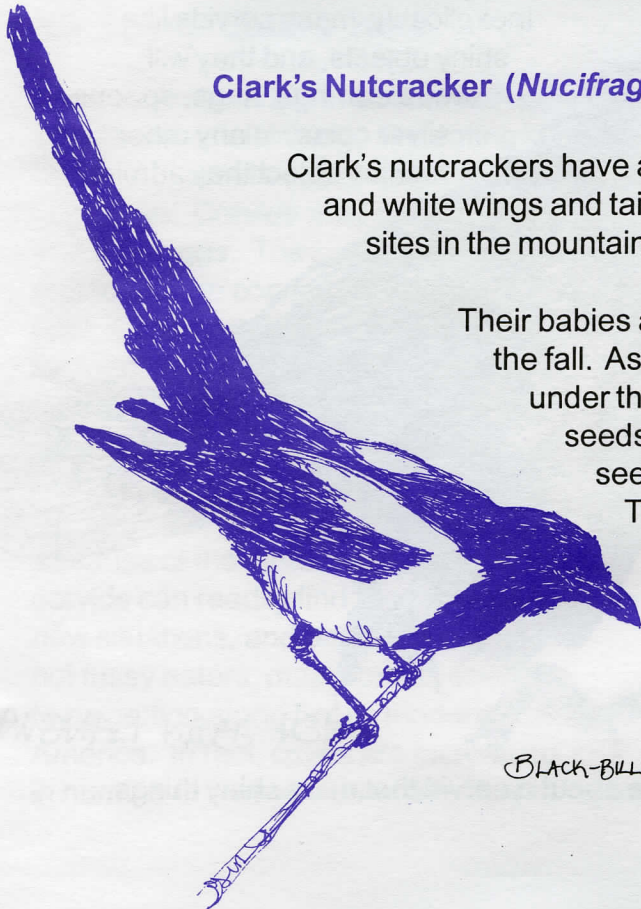
Steller's jays are a spectacular deep blue and black. Their black heads are topped with a feather crest and accented with white spots above their nose and eyes. They often roost in the forest at night and fly to the suburbs searching for food during the day.

Steller's jays will also steal from campers and picnickers, but they are usually a little less bold than gray jays. They are known for their harsh "ack, ack, ack" cry. Some people say it sounds like the jays are yelling "hawk, hawk, hawk" to frighten other birds away from food they want to eat. Sometimes they really do warn each other of an enemy hawk nearby.

### Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*)

Clark's nutcrackers have a long pointed bill, a gray head and body, and black and white wings and tail. They can act rather tame around popular picnic sites in the mountains.

Their babies are fed cached seeds, which nutcrackers gather in the fall. As they find seeds they store them in a special pouch under their tongue. The pouch can hold up to 120 pine seeds. The birds fly up mountain slopes to hide the seeds where the wind and sun will melt the snow early. They memorize thousands of hiding spots and retrieve the seeds with amazing accuracy months after they hid them. One bird might hide 30,000 seeds!





## Corvid Talk

Crows, jays, ravens and nutcrackers have instinctive calls common to birds of their type. Crows caw crow talk, jays scream jay talk, and magpies chatter in magpie talk, but corvids can also imitate other sounds they hear, and some may make up new combinations of sounds.

Studies have shown that crows have a couple dozen different calls for different purposes such as gathering together or announcing hunger or warning of danger or scolding. Alarm calls are different depending on the nearness or seriousness of the danger, too.

Ravens talk to themselves, murmur to their mates, and yell at other ravens. Some scientists think ravens may have more calls than any animal except humans. They croak, caw, rattle, trill, warble and whine. Some calls sound like drums, gongs or bells. Others are doglike growls or barks. Ravens in different locations seem to have slightly different calls just as people in different parts of a country might speak slightly different forms of the same language.

Body language is important too. Ravens can stick out feathers around their head, throat, and legs in different combinations to signal a variety of messages. A momma raven will use her bill to comb or preen her babies' feathers for a half hour while the babies make soft contentment sounds. The mated pair preen each other while softly murmuring, and sometimes one of the pair will hold its mate's bill in its own for several minutes.

## Tempt a Thief

You can try tempting a corvid with something shiny. A small strip of aluminum foil might work. A rock on the edge will keep it from blowing away. Put it out when you see corvids nearby then find a safe place a little distance away where you can watch.

Write down or draw what you observed. Did a bird come to investigate? If a bird took the foil, did you see where the bird put it? You might have to repeat your experiment many times before you are lucky enough to attract a curious bird. Just remember not to leave any litter.

Inexplicably, many corvids like shiny objects, and they will swipe earrings, rings, spoons, silver coins, or any other shiny object they admire.



Clever Crow is a picture book by Cynthia DeFelice about a corvid that nabs shiny things.