

Common Raven

by Linda Spielman

Ravens were once widespread throughout North America, but they suffered steep declines during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike their cousins, the crows, ravens couldn't cope with the rampant deforestation, the unremitting conversion of wildlands to agriculture, and the decimation of large herbivore populations. But in the last half century our forests have made a remarkable recovery, much of our marginal farmland has been turned over to natural processes, and our deer populations have rebounded. The forests which now cover about 65% of central New York are an ideal habitat for ravens, and these fascinating birds can now be seen throughout our region.



If you hike or ski in the Hammond Hill area you're likely to hear or see a raven. They are similar to crows in shape and coloring, but larger. Their bills are heavier than the bills of crows, and their throat and facial feathers are shaggy. A raven sighted overhead has a wedge-shaped tail, and it soars more and flaps less than a crow. But I find that I usually hear ravens before I actually see the birds. Their vocalizations are varied and often unusual, and once heard are instantly recognizable. You may hear a resonant croak that is much deeper and—to me—more musical than a crow's caw, or a grating kraaa sound. Ravens also make knocking sounds like a mallet hitting a piece of wood, various rattles and chuckles, and notes that are reminiscent of a cross between a flute and a trombone. Ravens are also good imitators and may produce vocalizations that sound eerily human.

Ravens show tremendous flexibility in behavior, and this is especially true when it comes to diet. They consume carrion, insects, vegetables, grains, fruits, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds and bird eggs, and food waste. Deer remains are a significant source of fall and winter food in our region, and if you come across a carcass in the snow, there may be tracks showing that ravens have been feeding there. Ravens have feet that are similar to those of common songbirds, with three forward-pointing toes and one backward-pointing toe. But aside from being much larger, raven tracks differ from those of birds like robins and juncos in having a middle toe that is angled toward the inside (check out the photo of a raven's right print). Ravens share this trait with crows (which also feed on carcasses), but raven tracks are about four inches long while crow tracks are only about three inches long.



Ravens have larger brains than most other birds, and they have demonstrated their extraordinary cognitive abilities in numerous experiments. In one test a food item was hung on a long string below a raven's cage so the bird couldn't reach it. The raven appeared to examine the situation for a few minutes. It then reached down and pulled the string up with its

beak, stepped on the string with its foot, and reached down to pull up more string. It repeated these steps until the food was within reach. For a bird to solve this kind of problem without any intervening trial-and-error learning, using behaviors that would not have been used in the wild, shows remarkable problem-solving ability.

The large brains of ravens may also account for their playfulness. They engage in catch-me-if-you-can games with wolves, otters, and dogs by sneaking up and pulling on their tails.

They play keep-away with each other by breaking off twigs and tossing them about, and they slide down snowbanks for the pure fun of it. Ravens are also aerial acrobats, sometimes flying in pairs with locked talons, flying upside

down, or doing loop-the-loops. It's wonderful just knowing that these fun-loving and intelligent birds share our landscape. Their return demonstrates the healing power of nature.

