

Ravens Make Interesting Neighbors

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In ancient times ravens were regarded as birds of evil omen. It is hard to understand this today, for they are among the most playful of all birds. In windy weather they may often be seen performing aerial acrobatics, apparently just for their own amusement.

Once when I was sitting at the edge of a cliff overlooking Copper Creek, a few miles from my home, three ravens came to investigate me. One after another, as if playing follow-the-leader, they would swoop down at me, veer off up into the sky, then down again for another swoop. At the low point of each dive they would glide by surprisingly slowly, so that I was able to get a good look at them. They kept coming closer and closer until they were passing within six feet above my head. One doesn't often get an opportunity to view ravens at such close quarters, since they are intelligent enough to be shy of man.

Ravens are big birds, with a wing-span of up to three feet and a length of twenty-six inches. They are entirely black and look much like their cousins the crows, but they are larger and are found in mountain country, whereas crows inhabit lower areas. Also, the raven's calls are more varied. One peculiar call resembles the sound made by running a stick along a picket fence.

The ravens' playful nature may take a malicious turn, for they will sometimes attack other birds, seemingly just for sport. One day when I was out after huckleberries I saw two ravens checking a red-tailed hawk. The hawk dove through a dense stand of trees, and the ravens veered off rather than passing through the thicket. This gave the hawk time to catch an updraft and he began circling skyward; but the ravens caught the same updraft and came circling up after him.

After a while one of the ravens lost interest and flew away, but the other kept after the hawk. The birds circled up and up until they looked so small that they could be distinguished from one another only with difficulty, by the different shapes of their wings.

Finally the hawk reached the end of the updraft and the raven caught up with him. Then there began a thrilling aerial dogfight. First the raven would dart at the hawk and try to strike it with his beak; then the hawk in its turn would dart at the raven. Once or twice the birds seemed to succeed in striking one another. Whether they did any damage I don't know, but at last the raven gave up, flew away, and left the hawk soaring in lonely triumph at an immense altitude.

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