

CORVIDS: BIG BLACK BIRDS? MOSTLY...

WHO? Carrion Crows, Hooded Crows, Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies, Jays, Ravens, Choughs. ALL HIGHLY INTELLIGENT, CLEVER BIRDS!

QUICK HINTS: (This is not to replace bird identification books but to point out **MAIN I.D. POINTS**, and introduce you to bird folklore.) Right place? Right season? Right shape? Right noise? What to look for when you only have a glance...

Carrion Crows: [Old English: *craue* = bird's cry. + Anglo-Saxon: *gor* = *carrion (gory)*. Also called: Carner Crow (Norfolk); Gor Crow (Oxon); Corbie (Midlands); Crow (Aberdeen); Black Neb = beak (North England); Land Daw (Nthants)Doup, Daup, Dob (North: Lancs); Bran (together with Raven) (Cornwall)...]

When: PARTIALLY RESIDENT; some migration in Spring and autumn

Where: Common: in fields, farmland, woodland, upland fringe.

Colour: Glossy black; beautiful petrol sheen on wings (close up); **THICK BLACK BEAK; NO LEGGINGS!**

Shape: LARGE; NEAT FEATHERS; flat crown (like blackbird); powerful beak (= crowbar)

Flight: slow, steady flight; will 'play' in the thermals. Wings have large fingers.

Voice: **THREE TO FOUR DEEP CROAKS ONLY.** Rarely more. 'CRAA – CRAA – CRAA...!'

Seen: *Rarely in large groups. LOOK FOR ONE OR TWO, OCCASIONALLY THREE in the fields.*

Interesting Facts:

- 790,000 breeding territories
- Lifespan: 4 years; max: 17 years.
- Seen grabbing road-kill. Clever birds – rarely hit by vehicles.
- Capable of opening milk bottle tops for cream;
- Seen taking shellfish from shoreline
- Only one short brood a year (when they predate other birds' nests). Then small birds are safe.
- Nests are solitary and defend large territories round it most of the year.
- They will mob a bird-of-prey relentlessly.
- In winter, juvs (young birds = juveniles) and singles may join Jackdaws and Rooks in communal flocks.
- Males and females are identical; Juveniles are browner than parents.
- It can 'skip' along the ground sideways like a vulture.
- In Japan, birds have been seen placing walnuts in front of waiting cars at traffic lights, then collecting the crushed nuts to eat the next time the lights turn red.
- The territory of the breeding pairs is constantly being raided by non-breeding birds. Fights are constant.
- One of St Cuthbert's favourite birds on the Farne Islands.
- Myths: SAXONS: to see a crow on your LEFT = DISASTER. WELSH: to see one crow = unlucky; to see two crows = good fortune.
- Many wild flower names use 'crow': Crow-cup, Crow-needle, Crow Garlic, Crow Onion, Crowberry, Crowsfoot, Crowflower (buttercup): most of these are poisonous to man or animals.

Hooded Crows: IN SCOTLAND; occasional sightings elsewhere. [Hoddy Fraw & Huddy Crow (Scotland); Grey Crow (general); Royston Crow (general); Norway Crow (Norfolk); Corbie (Perth); Cawdy Mawdy (North); Craa (Shetland)]

Same species as Carrion Crows: most facts apply to both races.

Voice: Like crows but often hoarser and angrier.

Colour: Light Grey with black heads and wings. (Striking – nothing else like them)

Habitat: open countryside with trees nearby. More sociable than Carrion Crow.

Interesting Facts:

- 160,000 breeding territories
- It patrols roads for road-kill.
- A third younger bird has often been seen near a nest site, refusing to be chased away. When the parents give up. The third bird will join in feeding duties for their fledglings. Presumably it also learns from the pair, resulting in more successful raising of young later in its life.

- Faeroe Islands: Candlemas ceremony: maiden throws stone, bone, lump of turf at crow. Would she marry?

Rooks: = THE CROW CLOWNS [Barefaced Crows (general); Juvs = Perchers or Branchers; Cra (Wmorland); Croaker; Brandre (Cornwall)]

When: PARTIALLY RESIDENT; many migrate through Norfolk in Spring and autumn

Where: Common: large gardens, fields, woodland. Look for ROOKERIES in tall trees. Massive flocks in open land, particularly in winter. Busy active birds, coming and going.

Colour: LOOSE black plumage; with purple gloss. Except for young; WHITISH BEAK; DOMED HEAD.

Shape: LARGE SCRUFFY; SILK PYJAMAS ON LEGS!! They waddle. Males and females are alike.

Flight: STRONG; loves to play in the wind. Wings have long fingers. More graceful than crows.

Sounds: Wings flap in Rookeries; squabble and very noisy. Croak higher and nasal, and more croaks.

Interesting Facts:

- Lives 5 years – oldest 23 years.
- A gathering of Rooks is called a ‘PARLIAMENT’ – The NOISE IN THE ROOKERY!
- Rookeries usually contain about 50 nests; a handful of Rookeries have 300+! HaddoHouse, Aberdeen had 2274 nests in 1970s.
- Juvs steal twigs from other nests, so the female guards it while male collects twigs. The same nest is improved and used year after year.
- Rooks pair for most of their life if successful. They stay together all year.
- Winter roosting flocks can be huge. In Scotland one contained 65,000 birds. Flocks join up from some 20km around, using their own designated flight ‘highways’. When they have collected, fed and waited for the rest, at dusk they will take to the tall roosting trees.
- They move from trees to fields, morning and evening as though they had watches!
- Young rooks leave the nest, but are not fully fledged: they are called ‘Perchers’ or ‘Branchers’. On the ground they continue to beg for food from their parents. Bobbing, bowing and fluttering wings.
- They court in autumn, as they nest in the new year – egg-laying from February onwards
- Its food pouch (neck) swells when it is carrying food.
- The bare skin round their beak may be for cleanliness (like in vultures) when feeding on carrion.
- Juveniles look like crows and can be mistaken for them.
- Exceptionally intelligent, they can use tools for experiments; dropping stones into tubes to raise the water level to get worms; bending wire to use as a hook to raise a sort of basket of food.
- Scarecrows were for rooks, because of their numbers (rooks were called crows). Crowkeepers were hired at least from Elizabethan times. However, they do good, removing insects, grubs and larvae
- They foretold rain by: tumbling in the air; roosting at midday; perching on dead branches; flying to the hills; feeding in the streets of villages.
- Rooks abandoning a rookery were like rats abandoning a ship: your farm would fail.

Jackdaws: [From the sound:Caddaw (E. Anglia; Cadder + Caddy (Norfolk); Cawdaw (Suffolk); Jaikie (Scotland); Jack = knave or rogue.]

When: RESIDENT

Where: Very Common: gardens, fields, woodland, towns and villages; ALSO AROUND CLIFFS.

Colour: dark and light grey with black hood (or shawl) and wings; black ‘nose’. Pale eye.

Shape: SMALLER THAN CROWS & ROOKS. Same size as feral pigeons. Quick movements, and usually in flocks. Will mix with the larger birds in the fields.

Flight: Fast and skilful in flocks; tumblers and acrobats in thermals and strong winds; they roost together in large flocks and gather on rooftops, old mills and church towers (good place to find them). Need holes – or indoor roosts and nests.

Voice: ‘JACK’ ‘CHAK’ (hence its name. Daw = crow) Very noisy but easy to recognise – pitch quite high and almost musical. Also ‘KYA’.

Interesting Facts:

- They pair for life and are completely loyal. They keep in their pairs whilst in flight and mostly when in their flocks. They tap bills and preen each other in bonding.
- They strut around with upright stance.
- They stay near humans and can become quite tame.
- Norwich rhyme: ‘When three daws are seen on St Peter’s vane together;
Then we’re sure to have bad weather.’

Magpies: [Pied = multi-coloured: Pie, Piet; Madge; Mock-a-Pie, Magot Pie (East England); Longtailed Nan; Margaret's Pie (18C: Mag, Meg= chatterbox) ; Chattermag; Chatterpie (Norfolk); Cornish Pheasant; Bush Magpie. Pie= mixture (also refers to Meat Pies).]

When: RESIDENT

Where: Very Common: near humans – gardens, fields, woodland.

Colour: Handsome: black head, back, bib and tail, white breast and white patch on wings

Shape: VERY large: male: slightly larger and longer tailed. (The shorter the tail; the lower the rank.)

Flight: Striking black and white; rounded wings; long tail and white wing tips visible in flight. Unsteady flight

Call: Alarm caller for other birds, watching for raptors, etc: Noisy communication: **'CHAK-AK-AK'**

Interesting Facts:

- They pair for life. If seen in groups, one could be a juvenile; or group of 'juvs' roosting together.
- Omnivorous feeder, including eggs and young.
- They will sit in trees, wagging their tails.
- Often seen on the ground, strutting and flicking their tails up and down.
- They can recognise reflection in mirrors or shiny surfaces.
- Its arch enemies are crows, who usually win scuffles. They compete for food and nest sites. So they will nest near humans, as crows rarely will.
- It has 600+ sticks in its nest and mud, and builds a new one every year. They are well constructed domes with a roof – young pairs need to learn this.
- In USA, magpies will lay an egg in their own nest and then take it to another bird's nest in their beak. She then lays more and sits on them... something about not all your eggs in one basket?!
- As they sound almost human, it is said they have a drop of devil's blood in them.
- If you see a Magpie, you should say: 'Goodday, Mr Magpie'. Or doff your cap, spit in his direction and say: 'Devil, devil, I defy you' (Similar to its cry).
- When you see a magpie, look for a crow as soon as possible, so you won't get bad luck.
- Or when a Magpie 'crosses you' (crosses your path), then you must cross the Magpie (make the sign of a cross)
- One for sorrow; Two for joy; Three for a wedding; Four for a boy...' (Many variations up to ten.)

Jays: [Scold (Somerset); Devil Scritch; Jay Piet (Perth); Jay Pie (Cornwall, Devon, Midlands); Jenny Jay (Yorks); Kae; Oak Jackdaw]

When: RESIDENT; with some movement across the North Sea.

Where: Fairly Common, but SHY so not so easy to see: large gardens, parks, woodland. Seen easier in Autumn when collecting acorns and beechmast.

Colour: distinctive pink; black moustache, wing and tail. Beautiful fluorescent blue patch – it can stand out in a flash when in flight; also white rump and wing patches. Look out for small blue feathers on the ground. Surprisingly difficult to see in trees and undergrowth, despite colouring.

Shape: small, dainty, sit in trees singularly or nearby, but not always so easy to see. Like roof-tops

Flight: slow, unsteady fluttering, gentle deep undulations,

Voice: 'KRAIH' – LIKE CRYING BABY! Echoes throughout wood and far beyond. Can be mistaken for Magpie though different. Also a Buzzard-type Miew: 'PEEAY'. (Quiet in nesting time). Can warble quietly.

Interesting Facts:

- The ACORN BIRD – survival technique. It also spreads the range of the oak tree. In this way it ensures oaks in the area for its offspring.
- It will collect about 3,000 acorns a season. Some birds commute up to 2 ½ miles to collect them.
- It can carry 3-4 acorns at a time in a throat-pouch. Some have gathered up to 9 at once.
- It hides them under roots, moss, leaves; inside hollow logs on ground; shallow holes.
- They are mostly vegetarian, but will take an occasional egg or nestling.
- They are rarely far from trees, and prefer open woodland.
- Usually seen as individuals, or pairs.
- It can mimic other birds including magpies, tawny owls, sparrowhawks, crows... also creaking trees!
- It raises a 'salt-and-pepper' crest when alarmed or excited.
- It visits gardens very early as it is shy, but then shrieks and wakes people up.
- Its warning shriek is use by all the local birds. Therefore it is known as the 'Guardian of the Forest' and 'Screamer of the Woods'.

- 'Pie' and 'Piet' = multi-coloured plumage.
- They secretly rob other birds' nests including at times other jays.

Ravens: [Corbie Crow (Scotland); Croupy Crow; Ralph]

When: RESIDENT SCOTLAND, WALES, IRELAND; TOWER OF LONDON (wings clipped); some rare movement into rest of the country.

Where: RARE: HIGHLANDS and mountains.

Colour: black 'as night'! Heavy, formidable, black beak; thick head.

Shape: HUGE, dainty, sit in trees singularly or nearby, but not always so easy to see. Likes roof-tops.

Almost as big as a Buzzard.

Flight: silhouetted when in flight. Wedge-shaped tail. Soars in thermals – mistaken for bird-of-prey. 'Plays' in flight. Deep wing beats, glides, twists, turns. On shallow descent, will flip onto its back, then upright: repeated 3-4 times, or complete roll. Will synchronise flight exactly with mate

Voice: DEEP, metallic 'KRRARK', 'PRUK-PRUK-PRUK!' (echoes)

Alarm Call: ARRK-ARRK-ARRK' echoes round mountainside.

Interesting Facts:

- Sits and watches from high cliff ledge.
- The WORLD'S largest perching bird. It can count to 5 or 6.
- Will hang upside-down on branch: slide down snowy slopes – for fun?
- Many bonding rituals in air and on ground.
- On the tiny island of Skokholm, Wales. The Ravens have lived there before man. They rule the island and a young bird takes over the necessary role immediately if one bird dies.
- Anglo-Saxon: '*Hrafn*' – respected. Norse god Odin = *Hrafnagud: The Raven God. His pair of ravens was sent to cover the world and then on return, perched one on each shoulder and whispered all the secrets and actions of the world to him.*
- The Ravens scavenged their battlefields (foreboding), and was associated with death.
- Later (St Kilda, Ireland, etc): they had powers of prediction: by their different calls. The Norse battle standard had a raven on it. When the flag stood high= winning. If it drooped = defeat.
- In Yorkshire, a threat to children = 'the black Raven will get thee!' = Bonaparte.
- The Raven is the bird that Noah sends out to find land: it is therefore connected with water, storms and heavy rain all over the world.
- To see 1 = lucky; 2 = misfortune; 3 = the devil.

Choughs: [was pron. Chow; Cio, Ceo became Orange, Coo, Chogh; Chough (also used for Jackdaws); Cornish Daw, Cornish Kay, Chauk, Tsauha; Cliff Daw, Sea Crow; Killigrew; Palores (Cornwall)]

When: RESIDENT but local to CORNWALL / WELSH COAST

Where: VERY RARE: ROCKY COASTAL CLIFFS.

Colour: black with green-blue gloss. RED LEGS And longish curved RED BEAK.

Shape: Jackdaw-sized. Thin, down-curved red beak – unique in crow family.

Flight: excellent tumbles and soaring acrobatic flight in thermals.

Voice: Many – jackdaw-like 'SCHRRR; KCHRAU; KYAH; KIAO; PCHEU.'

Interesting Facts:

- It needs short sheep/rabbit cropped turf to get insects out. Lack of this results in rarity of birds. It is a specialised feeder.
- It is on Cornish Coat-of-Arms, but has had to be re-introduced there. Also in arms of Flintshire and North Wales.
- Pliny: The Fire Raven' – thought to bring fire.
- Now pronounced 'Chuff', it was pronounced 'Chow' in Shakespeare's time – more like its song. He used the name for the Jackdaw as well.