

North Cotswold Ravens *Corvus corax*

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When I started to compile my personal records on this icon of the bird world back in January 2006, Ravens were being encountered with increasing frequency during my hawk-watching outings. Like the Common Buzzard the Raven was making a steady and determined return to many parts of the UK from whence it was previously driven to local extinction, perhaps to within a feather's breadth of national extinction.

I have always associated the Raven with memorable birding trips often to holiday destinations such as St. Michael's Mount, Cornwall, the River Exe estuary in Devon, the Jurassic Coast, Pembrokeshire coast and the Elan Valley. All typically scenic locations to name but a very few of course, but I am tempted to think our North Cotswold birds came from the principality of Wales via Herefordshire, perhaps even to some extent neighbouring Gloucestershire, all of which host classic high country haunts with extensive tracts of woodland. The North Cotswolds were an obvious option for the big Corvids' eastward spread very much in the manner of the Buzzard.

Essentially all my written records of *Corvus corax* in the Cotswolds have been chance encounters as I have yet to experience the nesting habits of this most secretive of creatures when it comes to matters of the home. I have had to rely on coastal nesting birds (usually viewed from a distance) to witness their domestic arrangements. These coastal eyries can be massive structures on a par with ancient abodes of Common Buzzards, often returned to and rebuilt over subsequent years.

In his book *The State of the Nation's Birds*, Whittet Books, 2000, the late Chris Mead of the British Trust for Ornithology did not see the Raven's current situation across the UK as very promising. However, this state of affairs has been turned on its head and Ravens are increasingly turning up even in fairly average lowland farmland on a regular basis, let alone remote wildernesses. Mr. Mead would be much heartened.

Back in 2002 my diary notes wax lyrical about multiple encounters I had with the great sable legend from Chipping Campden to Temple Guiting describing typical characteristics as bull-necked, big-billed with jowly head and wedge or diamond-tailed.

Come September 2003 two groups of three and two Ravens showed over Broadway Hill when I noticed the twosome embroiled in a claw-grappling tumble with feathers literally flying. These five birds reappeared again as a single group, a family unit heading off together, tumbling and rolling, playing on the wing as they went, followed five minutes later by rumbles of thunder and heavy rain. In days of yore this would have been viewed with great foreboding. However, when the sun comes out Ravens are quick to celebrate with their aerial frolics, though I've watched swarms of Rooks trying to put the dampers on the partying giving their greater cousins the same treatment as befits any bird of prey that dares to enter their neighbourhood.

Christmas Eve of 2003 presented me with a rare sight whilst driving into Broadway from Willersey. A dead sheep in a roadside paddock had a Raven perched atop and waiting in the wings for their opportunity to intervene were three Magpies, utterly dwarfed by their massive cousin. It was a lucky observation as the carcass had been removed within a few hours.

As the sun broke through the early morning mist on 31st March 2004 whilst driving up Broadway's Fish Hill, I glanced left to notice the awesome image of a roaring Raven just inside a steeply sloping sheep field. The bird was obviously calling loudly, its body straining forward, head and neck out-stretched for maximum effect.

The Fish Hill road is a notorious one, renowned for its traffic accidents both human and animal. This morning's big Corvid was

signalling to all around I'm here so take note, nearby there lay the corpses of a Kestrel and Badger in a bend in the road. It is unfortunate that many of my notes err on the side of the macabre, but bearing in mind at the time of writing these notes they were all very new birding experiences in the North Cotswolds and the Raven after all is a scavenger by nature. It is said that few scavengers bother with commonplace corpses of Badger, but again one was visited by a Raven on the Fish Hill road in October 2004.

By 6th April another roadkill lay at the kerbside of that fateful bend, a hen Pheasant. As I rounded the bend coming down the hill, a large shiny black Corvid bounced and bounded away from the body and hopped over the low Cotswold stone wall into the field. As I passed by that massive pick-axe bill was very evident, perhaps even belonging to the roaring bird of the previous encounter. Another hen Pheasant corpse near Chipping Campden later in the month had two Ravens feeding in the road, clearly an important food source for them in the heavily kept Cotswolds.

We experienced an atmospheric Cotswold evening on 13th August 2004. Following a meal at the Snowhill Arms and a drink in the beer garden, angry skies loomed as the Oat Hill Rookery became heightened with pre-roost activity. Hirundines sped across the grey sky and the first drops of rain began to fall with the storm front arriving on a cool wind from the valley below. On our descent of the Snowhill Road heading for home we met with a Raven beating a retreat over the road with an appropriate stern-faced expression.

Repeated journeys up and down Fish Hill on 30th December 2004 were not without incidents of interest for this local birder. A Raven and two Magpies paid visits to a roadkill Rabbit, then an hour later when a Raven in low flight around the Knap was suddenly attacked with repeated dive-bombing by a jack Merlin no less. It is difficult to determine why this incident occurred outside the breeding season, perhaps more especially as the Merlin has not been confirmed as anything more than occasional winter residents here. The mere presence of a Raven seems to bring out the worst in a bird's demeanour.

By 2014 it could be said with no exaggeration that Ravens and Buzzards have become established successful breeding residents easily seen on a daily basis, which in all honesty is unknown from living memory, perhaps even into hundreds of years back. Merciless persecution pushed these birds along with Peregrine and Red Kite into remote wilderness areas away from human habitation waiting for their cue to reclaim ancient haunts in more aware times. All these birds suffered at the hands of nest raiders and gamekeepers historically when anything possessing a hooked beak or black plumage was destined for the egger's display cabinet or keeper's gibbet.

Typically though nowadays, it is of great entertainment to me watching Ravens and Buzzards rising from and wheeling round an escarpment copse, such as late one October morning in 2014. As the autumn sun reached its peak one of each of these birds circled up in opposing spirals inevitably coming to blows and were engaged in a brief claws to talons tumble before splitting off in opposite directions. The Raven on rejoining its mate with typical Corvid banter, began twisting over in flight with wings folded in, flipping over on to its back almost in pretentious celebration of a territorial victory. In truth the Buzzard and its congeners were stronger in numbers by at least 3 to 1 and I don't believe any raptorial pride had been hurt in the slightest.

But what about that Corvid banter? One can't possibly write up a study of the *Corax* clan without discussing that voice. Since the times of Gilbert White authors of ornithological repute have tried most amusingly to put into words their own descriptive interpretation of the Raven's otherworldly vociferous repertoire. Indeed the far-carrying hollow bark almost always precedes a visual connection and this has been interpreted variously as *crank*, *gronk*, *pruk* or *rork*. However, the Raven is capable of enjoying a wide range of vocalisations depending circumstances. Being highly social

and rarely without an accompanying mate these birds are constantly engaged in conversation. A pair visiting our Broadway Nature Reserve during a volunteers' work party at first confounded us with strange frog-like croaks, was it a pond-dweller or was it a seasonal visit by a Woodcock? Well neither as it turned out. In true Raven-style these two gate-crashing visitors provoked many comments afterwards, even to say how unsettling an experience it was for us, it's no wonder these awesome birds come with a history of doom-laden myths and suspicions, but thank goodness more of us are able to find out for ourselves what these icons are really all about now that they're back from the brink once again.

References

- Mead, C., 2000. *The State of the Nation's Birds*. Whittet Books, London.
- Turner, M.E., 2007. *Hawkwatch*. Trafford Publishing.