

Living with a Raven - notes from my diary.

Rosemary Winnall

Beginnings

In the summer of 1996 I received a phone call from Vet Gareth Thomas from Ludlow asking if I would look after a young male Raven. The bird had been rescued from near Llandoverly by Tony Cross (who leads a Raven ringing team) who'd noticed it still in the nest and alone very late in the season in April 1996. He realised there was a problem and on investigating found that the bird was unable to leave the nest as his leg was caught up in some baler twine – a problem that he encountered from time to time whilst ringing nestlings. The bird was malnourished (although he might have been receiving some food from his parents) and his leg was deformed. Tony took the Raven to Gareth Thomas (another member of the same ringing team) who agreed to treat his leg and a broken wing, and nurse him back to health. The bird gradually regained his strength, and Gareth tried to encourage him to fly by taking him up onto Clee Hill where there were other Ravens, but realized he was never able to fly and could not be released into the wild (01, 02, 03).



01. Tok the young Raven on his trip to Clee Hill. Gareth Thomas



02. Tok the young Raven. Gareth Thomas



03. Tok the young Raven. Gareth Thomas

He lived in the Thomas's back garden, but this arrangement was not working as, for some reason, the bird took objection to Gareth's wife Gloria who would receive some nasty pecks to her backside and legs when she ventured forth, so eventually she delivered an ultimatum and the bird had to go. I went over to meet Tok (as he was called) and Gareth warned me that he was rather mischievous and other favourite games were chasing the hens, pulled up onions from the vegetable plot and pecking people's shoe laces!

At that time my family and I lived in a house on the edge of Burnt Wood, Rock Coppice, near Bewdley in north Worcestershire. Our garden sloped down into oak woodland and my daughter and I had already nursed a number of injured birds, which we'd successfully released back into the wild. We already had a small recovery aviary that we'd built in the back garden. But taking on this Raven would be a much bigger commitment than we'd been used to, and we thought very carefully before agreeing to look after him.

On 29th August 1996 Tok arrived at our house standing on his perch in the back of Gareth's estate car. He was a large and magnificent bird, but at close quarters his beak looked as if it could do a lot of damage and I wondered how trustworthy he was. Gareth lifted him into our netted aviary, gave us instructions about his care, and made sure we had his telephone number before he left. During the first day my daughter Nicola (aged 13) and I took it in turns to sit and talk to him. We gathered a selection of items for him to play with which he received with interest. But when we left him alone we could hear his raucous voice calling from his enclosure - perhaps he was shouting for Gareth to come back?

We kept Tok in his aviary for two days whilst he got used to his surroundings and during which time we built a variety of perches for him around the garden. We spent as much time as we could with him, feeding him with meat on tweezers, stroking his head and tickling his neck. He learnt very quickly to hop up onto his feeding perch when food was offered. We provided a bath for him in an old dustbin lid and he liked to splash around and preen himself in the sunshine.

Freedom

On the third day we opened the aviary and Tok ventured out and started to explore. Although there were 100 acres of woodland in which he was free to roam, he didn't go far and returned to his aviary to be fed, to bathe and to hide his toys. He played with stones that he buried, he collected dead leaves, tossed moss into the air, and he found the bird table from which he helped himself. We built log steps so that he could hop up into the oak tree, and he seemed to love to get up high. From there, when no-one was looking, he sang - a beautiful melodious

song that I'd never heard before. From that night onwards he roosted in that oak tree, usually on the same spot on the same branch.

Soon the summer holidays were over and I had to return to work, and the children to school. We fed Tok in the morning and left him to roam freely whilst we were away. He always seemed really pleased to see us when we returned home, would come quickly when we called him hopping up to be stroked whilst making small noises of pleasure. We spent as much time as we could with him over the next few months and learnt so much in the process.



04. Tok in the garden. Simon Winnall

Maturing

Tok continued to mature and became heavy to carry around on my gloved hand. We always remained wary of Tok's big powerful beak and he drew blood on a number of occasions. He had a small hook at the end of his top mandible and his method of tweaking was to peck and twist - an effective method for opening flesh! As a precaution we usually wore glasses and gloves when we had close contact with him. He hated to have water sprayed in his face, so in the early days we used a water sprayer to curb his exuberance, and soon just the appearance of the sprayer became an effective deterrent against antisocial behaviour. When I returned from two days away, he seemed to greet me with affection, with his deep guttural sounds interspersed with his baby begging cries that I'd not heard for a long time. We often heard him singing from up in one of the trees interspersed with a great variety of purrs, chucks, squeaks, toks and woofs.

When we fussed him and stroked him he responded with a rich variety of sounds - deep guttural calls like belches in the throat. When he saw us though the French windows, he used to tap on the glass and display to us. When we were not with him he potted around the garden talking to himself with a wide range of low sounds. We put a ladder up against the birch tree and he got very excited climbing up into the branches. He could glide down, but sometimes crash landed, or overshot. He flew over the top of the bungalow on one occasion and we had to go and rescue him from the front of the house where he was looking very flustered.

Feeding

I fed him each morning. He used to watch me from a low branch in his oak tree from where he could look through the kitchen window. He used to get visibly excited when he saw me collect his feeding bowl, but when I took his food out to him, he would not take the food until he had greeted me properly. He would flutter down and jump onto his stump near the back door, fluff up, turn his back to me and wipe his beak several times whilst squeaking a few sounds used only on these occasions. He would then turn sideways and display by raising the feathers on head, throat, and around his legs. This was followed by him leaning forward and down, making some deep throaty sounds whilst clacking his beak, flashing his eye membranes and salivating. I

learnt that this ritual could not be hurried and if I was in a rush and went straight down to fill his water bath, he would come after me and give me a peck. I was slowly learning a new Raven language! We soon recognised the "I'm hungry" call, and his alarm call when a fox visited the garden.

At the beginning we were feeding Tok by hand on small pieces taken off meaty scraps obtained from our butcher, but soon we let him have much large pieces. Typically he would eat part of it and then peck off small portions and store them in his mouth pouch. He would then hop off, spill them all out on the ground, repouch them carefully and walk around looking for somewhere to cache them. He might dig a hole in the lawn, bury the food and then pull out grass or collect dead leaves to cover the pile. Or he might hide them under a stone or the corrugated reptile refugia. Sometimes he wouldn't be satisfied with the spot and would immediately dig them up and take them elsewhere. He would sometimes take a piece of meat up the tree with him and carry it around trying to find a recess in the bark in which to store it. Meanwhile Magpies, Carrion Crows and Jays soon learned that there was food to be found and became regular visitors to the garden. The crows were particularly brave and could often be seen perched near Tok in the tree or occasionally down on the ground with him. He soon accepted them as part of the scenery as he did with visiting pheasants, squirrels and our cat.

One day I was playing with Tok down in the coppice when he spotted our cat up near the house. He set off purposefully towards her with his lopsided gait, because she was eating a piece of the meat she'd taken from one of his food caches. On reaching her, Tok took hold of the other end of the meat with his beak and for a moment they were both pulling on about 4 inches of meat - an extraordinary sight, until Tok, after an extra hard pull, hopped off with his prize.

I regularly provided Tok with animal casualties. We started on mice and voles that the cat had brought it, and progressed to baby rabbits which I opened for him in the early days. We collected road kills and kept a variety of animals in the freezer. I soon learned to take the carcass indoors at night to prevent foxes from taking it. As well as rabbits Tok would eat birds and squirrels, but refused to touch a dead Polecat that we provided on one occasion.

He regularly stole food from our bird table and we often found pieces of bread in his bath, although we could never prove that he took the stale dry pieces to soften before eating. His beak was effective for tearing open a rabbit, but could also be used with extreme dexterity - to extract a pip from an apple core, to take a peanut when offered, to pull out a sultana from a hot cross bun, and even take a sugar strand from Nicola's fingers. He would jump up and try to catch a butterfly, pounce on a fly and eat beetles we exposed whilst gardening. Once he caught and killed a Blackbird that he'd cornered in the aviary, and a Grey Squirrel had a very close shave. He never went near the Wood Ant's nest whilst it was active, but could be seen pecking the mound in the winter. He quickly discovered the compost heap and spent much time there searching for grubs and worms. I saw him once burying a large worm in a small hole he'd dug and then covering it with lumps of grass - I'm pretty sure he never found that one again!

Playing

Tok was extremely inquisitive - everything in his small self-imposed 'territory' of about 50m x 30m needed to be checked out. One evening I forgot to take in the patio chair covers and by the time I got up early the next morning Tok had made four holes in one and was joyously pulling out all the stuffing! I quickly removed what was left, and Tok hopped off round the garden talking to himself as he went.

Tok found various items around the garden which he brought back to his perch to play with - a length of red plastic-coated wire, a piece of blue washing line, old plastic plant pots, a piece of pond liner, a strip of

day-go plastic, a crisp packet, an avocado stone and pieces of cardboard. Then we lost our set of emergency door keys that I'd kept hidden under a rock in the garden. A few weeks later I saw Tok playing with it and we retrieved the keys - rusty but still working!

Tok was active for most of each day. He loved to poke things through holes and into recesses, and the open door of his aviary had a small hole in it. We would often spot his head poking through, then he would post a small toy through the hole, hop round to the other side and post it back again. He liked the discarded bird box too with the broken lid. He would spend many minutes trying to put a feather, piece of plastic, lump of meat, pebble or piece of tissue through the round hole. He often played with the watering can that we used to fill up his bath. One day, as I poured out the water, I found it contained many purple petals from our *Rhododendron* bush which Tok had carefully collected and placed inside.

When I was taking down the patio furniture in the autumn, I found that Tok had stuffed a selection of his special objects down inside the umbrella tube base: two feathers, a paper hanky, a coloured stone, a lump of rabbit meat, sticks and leaves, a piece of white plastic, a plant label, a white sea shell and a Lego man! He had another spot where he stored precious things - between the lowest branches of the *Dutsia* shrub, and once I found there our little stone rabbit, a piece of glass, a nice granite pebble and a strip of roofing felt. He had a favourite object that he'd found down in the wood - a metal draught excluder. He used to carry it around, pounce on it and try to stuff it into cracks in the garden wall.

The items he collected most frequently were sticks, and soon the garden was littered with twigs and branches of all shapes and sizes. Everyday he could be seen up in a tree breaking off twigs. He would often jump up onto his perch with a stick in his mouth. He would drop the stick and quick as a flash bend and catch it again - time and time again. He loved to play with us and would delight in catching a stick we'd thrown in the air. Before long, when he saw one of us appear in the garden, he would grab a stick and hop across to play - we are not sure who was training whom! If I threw a stick for him he would quickly retrieve it and, using the same sentence and tone of voice I would say "Tok, give me the stick". He would let me have it so that I could throw it for him again. But with Nicky it was a different game. He would bring her a stick and she would try to grab it off him but he would twist his head at the last minute so that it was just out of reach. These games were repeated over and over again, and it was always us who tired first. (05)

Whilst playing with a stick, Tok would often turn over onto his back and twirl the stick in his beak and claws. If I was present he would let me tickle his tummy with the stick. He liked to be lifted off the ground holding the stick in his beak and this developed into an even more elaborate game involving a stick or his old plastic flowerpot. He would grip it carefully with his beak and I would hold the other end. Then I would lift him up and throw him up into the air, and he could flutter back down. If he managed to grip on with his feet as well before take off, he had an even better flight. He always rushed back for more, mouth open with excitement, until I tired - he was a heavy bird to throw into the air! (06, 07, 08, 09).



05. Tok and Nicky - the stick game. Rosemary Winnall



06. Tok and Rosemary. Simon Winnall



07. Tok playing with his stick. Simon Winnall



08. Tok and his plant pot - the throwing game. Simon Winnall



09. Tok and Rosemary. Simon Winnall

On 19 November 1996 we had a heavy snowfall. It snowed all day and Tok had a wonderful time. He would bury his beak in the snow, go down onto his tummy and shovel himself along with his feet - time and time again! He would roll over, legs in the air, and he learned to catch snowballs and cache his food under the snow. I saw him on his back in the snow spinning his stick round in his beak and feet. He liked to play with the ice we'd broken off his bath, and the big pile of soft snow that Nicola had made for him.

Fears

We gave him a short frayed knotted dog rope for Christmas and he liked us to lift him up on the air with him hanging on to the other end. Yet when we presented him with a two foot length of old climbing rope he appeared frightened and always steered clear of it - is this a built in fear of snakes I wonder?

He was very frightened when a fox or visiting dog appeared. He could spot a Buzzard high in the air and he'd watch its progress across the sky with his head on one side. One day a Buzzard landed in his oak tree and Tok flew down quickly and scuttled under the *Rhododendron* bush.

He was suspicious of any new person coming into the back garden and wasn't relaxed. If he did eventually sally forth he would head straight for their feet and peck shoes and laces. But when Gareth Thomas came back to visit after some weeks, he reverted to his baby voice and posturing, and obviously remembered him!

He would accompany Nicola and I (and sometimes the cat) for a walk down into the wood, going a little further each time. Although we were never sure how far he went off into the wood by himself, I don't think it was very far, and we could easily tell from his behaviour when he was out of his comfort zone, and then we would turn back and return the same way.

At the End

Tok had been with us for eight months and was gradually extending his relationship with me. If I was sitting out in the garden he would jump up onto the arm of the chair, or onto my knee. Occasionally he used to jump up onto my shoulder and ran his beak through my hair and these close encounters felt so very special.

But on 27th April 1997 when I got back from work, he didn't come when I called him. Nicky and I immediately set off down into the coppice to look for him and we were horrified to find him lying dead on the ground. His wings were folded and feathers unruffled, but his neck was broken and there were a few feathers missing from the underside of his neck. When I took Tok over to Gareth's the next day he could see bruising and bite marks on his neck and it became apparent that he had been attacked by an animal and killed instantly. We had noticed a hole close to where we'd found Tok and our neighbours mentioned that they had seen an animal like a Polecat in the area a couple of days previously. Tok's inquisitive nature meant that, if another animal had been present, he is likely to have been attracted over to investigate, and he would have stuck his head down the hole to take a closer look, meeting his end with immediate effect. His habit of caching his food had almost certainly led to his death by attracting in predators.

We were all very saddened to lose Tok - a wonderful character and a special friend. We buried him under his oak tree and we shall never forget the months during which we were privileged to share his short life. Memories remain: the wonder of having such close contact with this large, powerful and intelligent bird; the beauty of his colourful plumage; those tiny feathers around his eyes; stroking his beak warmed by the sun; his ingenuity; ruffling his glossy feathers; his sense of fun; feeling his warm feet as he stood on my knee; sharing in the games he devised; wondering at the range of sounds he made; and listening to that wondrous song from up in the treetops. I now have an enormous respect for Ravens and can fully appreciate how they have had such a special place in our history, folklore, legends and mythology.

Thanks

Thanks are due to Tony Cross for rescuing Tok from his nest prison and for providing details of the event, and to Gareth Thomas who, through his veterinary treatment enabled Tok to have an active life, and (with Gloria's encouragement) enabled me to have the privilege of sharing a few months with a Raven of character. Many thanks to Gareth and to Simon Winnall for the use of their photographs. Gareth has also made some excellent recordings of Ravens' rich variety of calls and songs, including Tok singing. He has agreed to digitize these for us to share, so a website link will be coming soon.

Images

01. Tok the young Raven on his trip to Clee Hill. Gareth Thomas
02. Tok the young Raven. Gareth Thomas
03. Tok the young Raven. Gareth Thomas
04. Tok in the garden. Simon Winnall
05. Tok and Nicky - the stick game. Rosemary Winnall
06. Tok and Rosemary. Simon Winnall
07. Tok playing with his stick. Simon Winnall
08. Tok and his plant pot - the throwing game. Simon Winnall
09. Tok and Rosemary. Simon Winnall