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Observations of Common Raven in Metropolitan Toronto

by
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On 22 April 1986, between 0900h
and 0935h in Prince of Wales Park,
Etobicoke, Metropolitan Toronto
(43°36'N, 79°30'W), I saw a
Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) fly
in a seize a Rock Dove (*Columba
livia*) with its feet, take it to the
ground, and proceed to pluck it.
The prey moved for about 30
seconds, but the only distress calls
that I heard were from nearby
American Robins (*Turdus
migratorius*), House Sparrows
(*Passer domesticus*), and European
Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

While I watched the scene from
a distance of 15m, my dog was able
to cautiously stalk the birds,
approaching to within 2m before
the raven flew off, carrying its prey

in its feet, to a Norway Maple (*Acer
platanoides*) about 40m away. Here it
continued plucking the pigeon,
holding it firmly in its claws, while I
was able to watch the procedure
from a distance of 10m beneath the
tree. I left to get a camera before
the incident concluded. When I
returned 10 minutes later, the
raven was, unfortunately, gone, as
was the Rock Dove, except for its
gizzards, feet, feathers, and breast
bone, which remained on the
ground underneath the tree.

Prince of Wales Park is an urban
park located on the shore of Lake
Ontario in west Toronto. Twenty
minutes prior to this attack I had
observed a raven fly into an area
between the houses on the

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northwest side of the park. I did not observe where the raven perched or the condition of the Rock Dove or its position when it was seized.

A few days later, on 28 April, Mike DeLorey and Derek Spindlow (pers. comm.) saw a raven fly this same route that I had originally observed, but it was not in pursuit of anything at this time.

Catching large birds like a Rock Dove appears to be unusual behaviour for a raven. Bent (1946) mentions one incident where a raven invaded a chicken coop to kill a sickly hen. Ravens are normally scavengers but will regularly attack young nestling shorebirds on the tundra or "sick or injured individuals of a species it does not otherwise interfere with" (Goodwin 1976).

Ravens generally inhabit wilder, mountainous country and sea coasts in both Arctic and forested regions of Canada (Godfrey 1986). Although its breeding range in Ontario has recently expanded south of Algonquin-Haliburton and the Bruce Peninsula (Blomme 1987), the raven is of rare occurrence in the southern parts of the province. One raven has been reported regularly in Etobicoke for the past five winters (Figure 1). During the winter of 1985–1986 there were at least eight individual sightings of a raven along the waterfront and it is possible that these all refer to the same bird, as there is no previous history of repeated occurrences of ravens in southern Ontario over a period of

this duration.

During the winter of 1986–1987 a raven was again frequently seen along the western Toronto lakeshore — an area which has many similarities to the raven's normal habitat farther north — numerous spruce trees, open stretches of tundra-like landfill sites, and a large body of water. Several incidents are worth relating as they indicate how the raven could be surviving outside of its usual range.

A raven was seen by Don McClement (pers. comm.) on 20 November 1986 perched above a Rock Dove roost at Eighth Street and Lakeshore Boulevard West. The raven singled out one Rock Dove and swooped after it, which the other Rock Doves "looked on in alarm". M. DeLorey and I watched a raven in active pursuit of another Rock Dove, chasing its quarry quickly in and around city buildings at Lakeshore Boulevard West and Thirtieth Street on 27 January 1987. It often approached to within 30cm of its prey but was not observed to catch anything at this time. A raven was observed again at Eighth Street and Lakeshore Boulevard West by Russ Musgrove (pers. comm.) on 15 February 1987 "harassing the pigeons".

As I watched a raven fly over a roost of Rock Doves on 1 February 1987, I noticed that this was enough to put the flock to flight, scattering them. It has been my experience that American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) do not seem to create this response.



Figure 1: Common Raven, Etobicoke, Metropolitan Toronto, 21 March 1987.
Photo by T. Sabo.

Minutes prior to this I had watched the same raven sparring with the lead bird in a flock of Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), clashing their large bills over one of several pieces of bread that the raven had swooped in to snatch off the ground on which the geese had been feeding. The rest of the flock was obviously alarmed, too: with necks outstretched, they all rushed over, ready to attack, but the raven departed.

Close to the lake, Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) were then observed chasing this raven. A flock of 10 gulls pursued it in and around apartment buildings and houses for five minutes, often

getting close enough to practically land on its back. The raven escaped by flying inland.

On 25 April 1987 Bruce Wilkinson observed a raven carrying branches to a nest it was constructing on the grounds of the old Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, a place where a raven has been frequently sighted. Two nests were subsequently discovered, 0.6m apart, under the centre eaves of one of the four-storey-high "cottages" (Figures 2 and 3). The nest on the left (Figure 2) was approximately 40cm in diameter and 30cm deep, made of old leafless branches. The one on the right (Figure 3) was smaller at that

time, but it was the one on which the raven was working, carrying in 40–50cm long green branches about 2cm in diameter. D. Peuramake and D. McClement (pers. comm.) have seen the raven breaking off large branches from the trees on the property from early March to late April.

By the first week of May 1987, I observed that the nest on the right had become as large as the one on the left. Rock Doves were always seen on the roof of this building and many feathers of dead birds remained on the ground. Starlings also perched on the nests when the raven was not present.

By mid-May the nests had been completed, but the raven had disappeared from the area. A second bird was never seen and, presumably, this raven is not mated.

The fall and winter of 1987–1988 again produced numerous sightings of a raven along the Etobicoke waterfront. On one occasion (30 November 1987) I saw it doing cartwheels in the wind above the apartment buildings at Lake Promenade and 34th Street.

No observations have been made of this bird in the summer. However, there are a few sightings that have been made in spring, the latest being 4 June 1986, by the

Figure 2: Common Raven nest under the eaves of Cottage 5, former Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, Etobicoke, Metropolitan Toronto, 28 April 1987. Photo by Beth Jefferson.



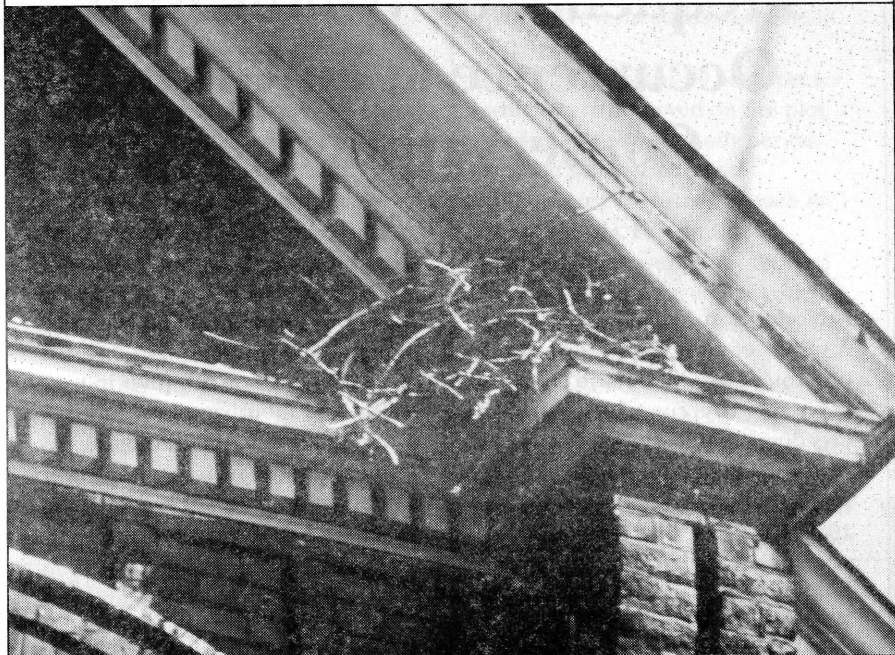
author. On 12 May 1988 several observers saw the raven being chased by small "blackbirds" at Marie Curtis Park West, at which time it looked quite huge and "ratty".

A raven appeared at Burnhamthorpe Avenue and Dixie Road on 12 September 1988, being harassed by a crow (Cora McEvoy, pers. comm.). The next morning the identical behaviour was observed by C. McEvoy and the author 6km south of this location. A crow was preventing the raven from landing in a tree at Marie Curtis Park West by its continual harassment. With its feet dangling,

the raven tried to shake off the crow. During the last two weeks of September 1988 the typical bell-like note of a raven was heard twice in the West Humber Ravine, approximately 16km north of the lake at Islington Avenue and Albion Road (J. O'Donnell and R. Scovell, pers. comm.). Almost daily sightings of a raven have been made at the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital during October and November 1988 (D. McClement, pers. comm.).

Metropolitan Toronto is only 125km south of the usual breeding range of ravens and therefore it is not inconceivable that a wild bird

Figure 3: Common Raven nest under the eaves of Cottage 5, former Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, Etobicoke, Metropolitan Toronto, 28 April 1987. Photo by Beth Jefferson.



has established residency in the region. Corvids, however, are often kept in captivity. It is interesting to speculate whether this is an escaped bird, as some have suggested, or whether this is a wild raven that has used adaptive behaviour to live successfully as both a predator and a scavenger in an unlikely environment. The general consensus of opinion of all the observers of this "Etobicoke" raven is that its general attitude, its caution, timidity, nesting, and hunting behaviour indicate that it is a wild bird, not an escapee. Furthermore, is the bird's apparent disappearance in the summer due to a lack of birders making observations or indicative of migration or nesting behaviour?

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Frequency of Winter Bird Occurrence at an Urban Conservation Area

by
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Introduction

A variety of published information on winter birds in Ontario is beginning to accumulate. Freedman and Riley (1980) reviewed changes in wintering species status during the period 1929-1977. The bird population

study published by Campbell and Dagg (1976) included data on wintering birds on five plots in urban and suburban plots. Smith *et al.* (1982) described winter bird communities of urban southern Ontario. Dunn (1986) reported the results of a seven-year bird feeder

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