

Common Raven Nesting in the Greater Toronto Area

Theo Hofmann

On 6 June 2003, while riding her horse in the North Tract of the York Region Forest, Allison Hegarty observed a large nest (Figure 1) in a Red Pine (*Pinus resinosa*) tree located at 17T 635276 4882134 (North American Datum 1983). The nest contained two young black “squawking” birds which she assumed were young American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). She did mention the nest to another rider, Christel von Richter, and on 24 June, Christel heard two

adult Common Ravens (*C. corax*) near the now empty nest. She wondered whether the supposed American Crow nest could in fact be the nest of the Common Ravens which she had heard nearby.

On 2 July 2003, Christel and I visited the nest, which we estimated was at a height of about 15 m. It appeared to be at least 1 m in diameter, which I thought was rather large for crows. We searched on the ground around the nest and found a skeleton of a black bird which was



**Figure 1: Common Raven nest in the North Tract of the York Region Forest in 2003.
Photo by Winnie Poon.**

still mostly covered with skin and feathers but missing the flesh. The bird appeared to be a juvenile since the feathers were not sufficiently developed for flight. The body was close to 45 cm long, which is rather long even for an adult American Crow and suggested that it might be a juvenile Common Raven.

I took the bird to the Royal Ontario Museum where Mark Peck and I were able to compare it with the skins of an adult American Crow, and both a juvenile and an adult Common Raven. Comparison of the nature and length of the culmen (6.0 cm), the nature of the covering of the tarsus and its length (6.1 cm) and the length of the wings (35 cm) agreed well with those of the juvenile Common Raven and differed sufficiently from those of the adult American Crow and the adult raven that we were confident that the skeleton was that of an immature Common Raven. Apparently, this young raven had fallen out of the nest some considerable time before we found it.

Common Ravens were present in the North Tract throughout the autumn of 2003 and the following winter. In 2004, the nest found in 2003 was abandoned. A new nest had been built, located at 17T 635188 4881947 (North American Datum 1983), at a height of about 10 m in a Red Pine, about 200 m from the 2003 nest. The new nest was in dense foliage and was difficult to see (Figure 2), unlike the 2003 nest which was in a more

exposed site (Figure 3). That this nest was also that of Common Raven was indicated by the agitated behaviour of two ravens which were calling and circling above us during a visit to the site on 3 June 2004.

Discussion

There are several casual observations of Common Raven, suggesting possible breeding, in the Toronto Ornithological Club Database (TOC) since 1994. The first was by Gordon Cameron who on 4 June 1994 observed a Common Raven carrying food in the Palgrave Conservation Area. From the year 2000 onwards, there were repeated sightings of Common Raven from the Palgrave Area, including Duffy's Lane, during January and February and during the breeding season from March to July, although so far no stronger breeding evidence has been obtained.

Apart from a Common Raven that paired with an American Crow and built a nest (see below), the York Region occurrence reported here is the first documented nest of Common Raven in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area, consisting of the Regional Municipalities of Halton, Peel, York, and Durham, and City of Toronto) in probably over 150 years.

There is evidence that at least three other pairs bred in the GTA in 2002, 2003 and 2004, but no nests were found. On 7 July 2002, Dennis



Figure 2: Common Raven nest in the North Tract of the York Region Forest in 2004. Photo by *Theo Hofmann*.



Figure 3: Common Raven nest in the North Tract of the York Region Forest in 2003, showing the open environment. Photo by *Winnie Poon*.

Barry, Ed Poropat and two other birders heard juvenile Common Ravens clamouring from the north side of Ravenshoe Road where it crosses Zephyr Creek, about 6.5 km west of Udora (D. Barry, pers. comm.). During their half-hour stay they also saw adult ravens flying back and forth across the road. Although the observers could not find a nest because the area is very swampy and very difficult to access, the fact that the young ravens called constantly from the same area suggested that they were still on or near a nest, although this late in the season the observers thought that it had to be assumed that the young would have fledged. In 2003, Dave Shepherd (pers. comm.) obtained suggestive evidence for breeding of a pair of Common Ravens in the Milton Quarry, Halton Region, and he confirmed breeding there in 2004. Lastly, on 5 June 2004, Rayfield Pye saw two adult and three recently fledged young ravens while he was atlassing in the Durham Regional Forest Main Tract. The five birds were sitting in a large dead tree on Higgin Lane, east of Concession 7, Durham (TOC).

Historical Record

The southward expansion of breeding Common Ravens into the GTA is interesting in itself, but especially so in a historical context. During the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project, Blomme (1987) concluded that the southern range limit of the Common Raven in Ontario coincid-



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David Renaud

ed with the southern boundary of the Canadian Shield. However, historically, the species was apparently once common in southern Ontario.

Alexander Wilson (1814) wrote the following about the occurrence of Common Ravens: "On the lakes, and particularly in the neighborhood of the Falls of the river Niagara, they are numerous; and it is a remarkable fact that where they so abound, the Common [American] Crow, seldom makes its appearance"; and further on in the same paragraph he mentioned a journey during the months of August and September in 1806 along the lakes Erie and Ontario and commented: "The Ravens were seen every day, prowling about for dead fish ... but I did not see or hear a single Crow

within several miles of the lakes". Black (1934) cited Charles Fothergill as having observed Common Ravens in courtship display on 21 March 1821 at Rice Lake. Fleming (1907) quoted a letter which mentioned that Common Ravens were present in Port Hope in 1820. Fleming also quoted Rev. John Doel as remarking that the last Common Raven pair in the Toronto area was killed in Queen's Park about 1848.

This was during a period when settlers moved into southern Ontario and caused the extirpation of the Common Ravens by direct persecution, by forest clearing for agriculture which removed their habitat, and by eliminating large predatory mammals by poison which in turn killed the Common Ravens which scavenged on the poisoned carcasses. In his book that was "apparently based primarily on material from Ottawa and Toronto" (McNicholl 1994), Alexander Ross stated in 1871 that Common Ravens had become very rare (Ross 1871). The extirpation of the Common Raven in southern Ontario extended northward into some areas on the Shield as well. MacLulich (1938) noted that even in the wilder parts of Algonquin Provincial Park, Common Ravens were rare due to poisoned baits put out by the rangers to kill wolves.

Although no significant expansion by Common Ravens toward the south seems to have occurred until the last few years, an unusual

event took place in Toronto which is described and discussed extensively in three papers by Jefferson (1989, 1991, 1994). It is very briefly summarized as follows. A Common Raven which was first observed in Etobicoke, City of Toronto, in 1985 (Jefferson 1989), built two nests in the area of the former Lake Shore Psychiatric Hospital in 1987, paired with an American Crow in 1990 (Jefferson 1991), and produced two hybrid offspring in 1993 (Jefferson 1994).

Conclusion

The reasons for the southward range expansion by the Common Raven in recent years are not immediately obvious. In contrast, preliminary results from the current Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas show a clear northward expansion of several species, which can be attributed in part at least to climate change due to global warming. Two possible contributing factors for the southward expansion of Common Ravens in Ontario come to mind. One is that they have been so successful on the Canadian Shield that the available territories are saturated and this has forced the birds southward. The other is that the return of many previously farmed areas to forested conditions is offering a more suitable habitat south of the Shield. More study is required.

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Information Source

(TOC): Database of the Toronto Ornithological Club.

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Theo Hofmann, 199 Arnold Avenue, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 1C1