

Notes

Common Ravens Kill a Common Loon

Kathy Irwin, Bob Irwin and Ron Tozer

On 4 December 2002, the only remaining open water on Baptiste Lake, *Hastings*, near Bancroft, Ontario, was some distance from shore. There had been several previous days with cold temperatures (down to -25°C), and the lake was freezing over. From their lakeshore home, Bob and Kathy Irwin noticed a large waterbird begin to run along the surface of the open water in attempting to take flight as three flying Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) approached. Single ravens then took turns swooping to peck at the bird as it struggled to become airborne, and the ravens finally succeeded in knocking it out of the air and onto the ice. The ravens landed on the ice beside the still struggling bird, and pecked it until it stopped moving. The ravens then proceeded to feed on the carcass. Bob Irwin (Fisheries Consultant) and Kathy Irwin (OMNR Bancroft District Biologist) examined the remains of the victim on the ice of Baptiste Lake on 30 December, and determined that it was a juvenile Common Loon (*Gavia immer*).

Discussion

Bent (1946) reported ravens to be “not at all particular about their

choice of food; almost anything edible will do, from carrion to freshly killed small mammals and birds or birds’ eggs, other small vertebrates, insects, and other small forms of animal life; garbage and various forms of vegetable matter are also welcome”. Raven researcher, Bernd Heinrich (1999), has described these birds as “opportunistic generalists that can feed on almost anything from fresh carcasses and the insects feeding on rotten carcasses, to tomatoes, Cheetos, and dog droppings”. There are many published accounts of predatory behaviour by ravens, including attacks on live reindeer, bison, cattle, lambs, fish, and seal pups (Heinrich 1989, 1999). However, “most of the reported predations are on other birds” (Heinrich 1999).

There are numerous records of Common Ravens catching and killing birds (Boorman and Heinrich 1999), with the prey “often struck in midair” (Heinrich 1999). These included raven attacks on Rock Doves (*Columba livia*; Elkins 1964, Maser 1975, Jefferson 1989, Schmidt-Koenig and Prinzinger 1992), an eider (*Somateria* sp.; Watts et al. 1991), and Northern Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*; Jensen 1991)

that were flying at the time. Interestingly, the American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) has been observed catching small birds in flight and killing them, as well (Verbeek and Caffrey 2002), including the European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*; Cuccia 1984) and the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*; Putnam 1992). Other reports of Common Ravens attacking and killing adult birds have involved partridge (*Perdix* sp.; Madge and Burn 1994), Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*; Allen and Allen 1986), ptarmigan (*Lagopus* sp.; White and Cade 1971), Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*; Parmelee and Parmelee 1988, Klicka and Winker 1991), and puffin (*Fratercula* sp.;

Madge and Burn 1994).

Ravens appear to recognize and attack birds that are sick, injured or otherwise disadvantaged with respect to escape, that may be too large to be preyed upon normally (see Goodwin 1976). Published examples of this type of situation include a raven chasing an injured Black Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*; Maguire 2000), and one that attacked and killed a Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) after this large shorebird had been repeatedly stooped on by a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*; Maguire 2000). The Baptiste Lake attack on the Common Loon may have been another example of this kind of raven predation.

Occasionally, Common Loons stay on lakes until freeze-up in central Ontario, and often, these lingerers are young-of-the-year (Ron Tozer, pers. obs.). Sometimes, these late loons even remain to the point where the reduced amount of open water prevents them from taking flight. At least some of these loons may involve juveniles that are still not capable of sustained flight due to a late hatching date, especially in years when lakes freeze over early. These factors may have been relevant in the Baptiste Lake loon incident reported here. The ravens may have recognized the loon's vulnerability and then pressed their attack.

Adult Common Loons are considered to have "few known predators on (the) breeding grounds", with Common Ravens reported as

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nest predators only (McIntyre and Barr 1997). We found no previous published account of an adult-sized Common Loon being attacked and killed by the Common Raven.

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White-winged Crossbill Predation by Blue Jay

Brad Steinberg and Ron Tozer

On 22 February 2003, at 1100h, Steinberg was snowshoeing along a trail about 50 m north of Access Point #9 in Algonquin Provincial Park, on the Madawaska River between Whitefish and Rock Lakes in Nightingale Township, *Haliburton*, Ontario. The site was a mixed forest with several large Eastern Hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) and White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), a few snags, some scattered White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*), and many small Balsam Firs (*Abies balsamea*). A male and female White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*) were heard vocalizing and then seen diving at something either on or near the ground, approximately 15 m away from the trail.

Steinberg snowshoed over to investigate, and after having travelled about 5 m, saw a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) fly up and come toward him with a dark object in its bill. As it approached him, the jay dropped what it was carrying, perhaps because his presence had startled it. The dropped object landed about 1 m in front of Steinberg on the snow. It turned out to be a dead, young White-winged Crossbill that was still warm to the touch (Figures 1 and 2). The young crossbill had a deep

wound in the back of its head, probably inflicted by the Blue Jay. The adult crossbills and the Blue Jay stayed near as the dead young bird was examined, but were much quieter. A search for a nest was undertaken, but none was found.

Discussion

The young crossbill was preserved (frozen) at the Algonquin Park Visitor Centre, and weighed 17.3 g when measured two days later, on 24 February. It probably weighed a little more when fresh on 22 February. This young crossbill's weight and fully feathered state suggest a nestling near fledging, but it might just recently have left the nest (Craig Benkman, pers. comm.). By comparison, White-winged Crossbill fledglings with partially crossed mandibles (which begins after about two weeks out of the nest) had a mean weight of 23.5 g, while non-immature males and females from Ontario averaged 25.8 g and 24.9 g, respectively (Benkman 1992).

If the young crossbill was taken from a nest by the Blue Jay, the occurrence would apparently constitute the first published report of predation of a White-winged Crossbill nestling. Benkman (1992) noted in *The Birds of North America*



Figure 1: Dead young White-winged Crossbill with wound to back of head, probably inflicted by Blue Jay, 22 February 2003. Photo by *Kevin Clute*.



Figure 2: White-winged Crossbill young, showing uncrossed mandibles, Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, 22 February 2003. Photo by *Kevin Clute*.


that there was “no information on nest predators” of the White-winged Crossbill, but that they give an “alarm call when red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) or Gray Jays (*Perisoreus canadensis*) approach nests” and “both are potential nest predators”. Hard mast (seeds and nuts), wild fruit, insects, and cultivated grains and fruit are the items most frequently eaten by Blue Jays, but they are known to consume some carrion and small vertebrates, including adult birds, their eggs, and nestlings (Tarvin and Woolfenden 1999).

The probable timing of the nesting that produced this young crossbill can be estimated roughly. Benkman (1992) reported the White-winged Crossbill incubation period as probably 12 to 14 days.

Coady (2001) estimated incubation as 14 to 16 days. There is no information available on the period from hatching to departure from the nest for the White-winged Crossbill (Benkman 1992). However, Red Crossbills usually fledge at 18 to 22 days after hatching (Newton 1972), and the White-winged Crossbill may be similar. Utilizing these figures, the young crossbill reported here may have hatched in late January or early February, from an egg laid about mid January.



Nesting by White-winged Crossbills may occur in any month of the year (Godfrey 1986), with food availability being the most important factor influencing its timing (Benkman 1990). Benkman (1992) identified three main nesting periods during the year, corresponding to conifer cone ripening phenology, including one beginning in January and February and requiring big “spruce cone crops with large numbers of seeds held in cones through winter”. White-winged Crossbills build a nest lined with “slender roots, moss, lichen, hair, cocoons and fine shreds of inner bark” that provides enough insulation to allow breeding during winter (Benkman 1992). Despite temperatures from mid January to late February 2003 that ranged from -38°C to only 4°C at the Lake Sasajewun weather station in Algonquin Park (Matt Cornish, pers. comm.), these crossbills were able to produce young.

White-winged Crossbills were



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common in Algonquin Park during the winter of 2002–2003, feeding primarily on the abundant White Spruce cone crop. For example, a total of 2,060 White-winged Crossbills was recorded on the Algonquin Park Christmas Bird Count on 4 January 2003. Many pairs and singing/displaying males were observed through January and

February, and widespread breeding was believed to have occurred.

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