

A Large Crow Roost in Essex County

by
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It is well known that during autumn and winter, the American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) often forms large communal roosts (Bent 1936, Haase 1963, Goodwin 1973). In recent years, for example, roosts of 10 000, 20–50 000 and 200 000–300 000 crows have been reported from Kentucky (Peterjohn 1982), Pennsylvania (Hall 1982) and Kansas (Williams 1981), respectively. In Ontario, the crow is a common summer resident throughout the province, an abundant migrant and a common winter resident in the south (James *et al.* 1976). Its numbers in winter are well illustrated by Christmas Bird Counts from Hamilton, Ontario where, for the years 1973–1982, numbers have ranged from approximately 1 600–7 000 and have been the highest recorded in Canada for that period.

In spite of the relative abundance of the American Crow in winter, at least in southern Ontario, little information is available on the sizes or locations of roosts. The purpose of this note is

to document the size and location of a large winter roost of crows which I observed in Essex County in extreme southwestern Ontario.

During the winter of 1978/79 I visited the garbage dumps in Essex and Kent counties on a bimonthly basis. On 22 November 1978, I noted 200–300 crows at each of two large dumps at Leamington and north of Harrow but did not have time to locate their roost(s). On 6 December, I was at the Harrow site before sunrise. At 0720h large numbers (400–500) of crows began arriving at and flying over the dump from the north. By car I backtracked the crows along their flightline [which was continuous and heavy (300–400 crows/200 m)] to a woodlot approximately 300 m north of the junction of Hwys 3 and 23 just south of the community of Essex. At 0733h there were approximately 500 crows sitting in a nearby ploughed field and good numbers in the woodlot. I was not sure if this was the actual roosting area or if it was only a primary dispersal area. At any rate all

birds seemed to be emanating from here and it was impossible to trace their flightline any farther.

That evening, at 1610h, I revisited the woodlot but noted only about 200 crows in the trees and none in the fields. While driving backroads I discovered a woodlot (on the farm of L. Casagrande, approximately 5 km southwest of the 3/23 junction), in which several hundred crows were already sitting and into which others were descending; still others were flying between the woodlot and a ploughed field 300 m to the north. At 1631h I estimated a minimum of 20 000 crows at this pre-roost site. At 1640h I returned to the woodlot north of the 3/23 junction and witnessed literally thousands of crows coming into the woodlot along four flightlines from the south, southwest, north and east. From 1648 to 1728h I counted and estimated the numbers of crows arriving at the woodlot along the two flightlines from the south and southwest only. Rates of arrival along these two flightlines ranged from approximately 300–800 crows/minute. During the 40 minute census period, over 25 000 crows arrived at the roost from these two flightlines alone! Considering that I was counting crows along only two of the four flightlines — albeit the two most dense — and that my count period probably extended over only about half of the crows' arrival time, I would estimate, that there could have been 50 000 to 75 000 crows at the roost.

I have been unable to find any reference to the age or previous size of this Essex crow roost, but a landowner living adjacent to the area said that crows had used the woodlot for a roost since at least 1954 (when he moved to his present location). Also, in 1975, J.P. Kleiman reported 75 000 crows from Essex County in November (Goodwin 1976). There is no mention of a roost but presumably these birds were affiliated with the Essex roost described above. On several occasions I have since searched for additional crow roosts in Essex county but always without success.

When considering the winter distribution of the American Crow in Canada, a roost of the size described here takes on potential national significance. According to the 79th Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC), the largest number of crows on any CBC in Canada was reported at Hamilton, Ontario (Anderson 1979). There, 4 000 crows were counted at their roost. The second largest number in Canada was at Chilliwack, B.C. (913) and the second largest number in Ontario was at London (542).

The Essex roost does not lie within the boundary of any CBC but rather is 19 km outside the count of the Pt. Pelee CBC. In 1978, the Pt. Pelee CBC tallied only 350 crows, the fifth largest number in Ontario. It is unlikely that the number of crows at the Essex roost had diminished greatly between my visit on 6 December

and the CBC on 24 December. Instead it would appear that only a small portion of the crows at the Essex roost dispersed into (or were counted in) the Pt. Pelee count area. Hence the majority of the crows from the Essex roost were not represented in the Pt. Pelee CBC, or in any other CBC for that matter.

I am unfamiliar with crow roosts or winter crow populations at Chilliwack, London or any of the 7 other locations across Canada that recorded more than 350 crows on the 1978 CBC. However, I have visited the Hamilton roost, though not until late January when numbers could have been somewhat reduced over the levels in December. My impression, in late January, was that the Essex roost was several times larger than the Hamilton roost. If this were true, and depending upon whether the other Canadian and Ontario counts of crows represented roost or non-roost counts, the Essex crow roost may be the largest one in Ontario and quite likely in Canada.

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