

ABOUT THE COVER: COMMON RAVEN

The Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) is the largest of all passerine bird species, and in the Pacific Northwest north through Alaska is an integral part of Native American art, folklore, and mythology. Edgar Allen Poe's famous poem has placed it "evermore" as part of our cultural tradition. The sexes are similar in plumage, and when seen at reasonable distance, the raven's larger size, wedge-shaped tail, "goiter" neck feathering, and large bill serve to separate it from crows. One of the most intelligent of birds, the raven can mimic sounds, and play, such as passing stones back and forth between members of a pair, is apparently an important part of its behavioral repertoire. They have been observed working in pairs tormenting cats, one bird distracting the cat while the other approached from the rear and pulled its tail. They are reported to live fifty years or more. They are excellent fliers, normally flapping and gliding, but often soaring or engaging in acrobatics.

This widely distributed species is found throughout much of the northern hemisphere, breeding in North Africa, Europe, and across Asia. In the western hemisphere ravens are found from the Aleutians across Canada through Greenland and Iceland, south to Nicaragua, and in the east in mountain areas south through the Carolinas. In many areas it is most common along the coast and rivers, although it occupies a wide diversity of habitats. Ravens are sedentary throughout most of their range, but young birds may disperse or migrate, and some migration has been reported for birds in the most northern parts of their range. In winter they join communal roosts of up to several hundred birds.

They generally begin searching for nest sites in February, and by late March or early April are nesting. Their courtship features aerial displays in which some resulting twisting, turning, rolling, and tumbling play important roles. They have a wide repertoire of gurgling and purring sounds, some of which are involved in courtship, but their most common vocalizations are the characteristic deep, guttural croaking notes. They nest on coastal or mountain cliffs, and sometimes in trees at heights from twenty to more than one hundred feet. They also have been recorded nesting on a wide variety of human structures including abandoned buildings, windmills, and oil derricks. The nests are sometimes four feet in diameter of sticks and twigs, with deep cups a foot or more across. They often reuse nests from year to year, refurbishing them and lining them with bark and hair from a wide variety of mammal species. The clutch size is usually three to six greenish-blue eggs, spotted or blotched with olive or brown. The female does most of the incubation, but is fed by the male. Incubation begins before the clutch is complete, so hatching is asynchronous, and the smallest chick often starves. This is an adaptation that in all probability capitalizes on bumper years for food during which the smallest chicks survive, but are easily outcompeted by

larger siblings in lean years, thus facilitating brood reduction and survival of the larger chicks.

Both parents feed the chicks which fledge in about six weeks. The chicks, however, do not fly well by this time and prefer to hop about. They remain with their parents for an additional six weeks, with the nest as the focus of their activities, and during this time develop their considerable flying skills. The diet of ravens is largely carrion, small vertebrates, and especially at seabird colonies, eggs and nestlings. In areas of human habitation, they rely heavily on roadkills for carrion. They are cosmopolitan in their diet, eating garbage, berries, fruit, and seeds. They cache food, and have been observed dropping mollusks on rocks in a similar fashion to gulls.

Ravens were reported as common when the pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts but apparently were extirpated locally by shooting and by habitat alteration. Ravens are wary and nest in remote areas where they are persecuted by man, but have become bold and tame in areas such as Alaska, where they are not harassed. They are routinely seen in towns, perched atop buildings or hopping along sidewalks, and at garbage dumps. The recent expansion of their breeding range into Massachusetts bodes well for these intelligent and interesting birds.

W. E. Davis, Jr.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST: ROBERT SHETTERLY

The Common Raven is the second contribution by Robert Shetterly to *Bird Observer's* covers. His first cover, Peregrine Studies, appeared on the October 1987 issue. He is a Maine artist and illustrator. His most recent book is *Speaking Fire at Stoves*, a collection of his drawings and etchings with poems by William Carpenter.

M. Steele