

But I'm not sure what interests were served by the decisions made regarding this Kirtland's. Its loss would have been tragic, and verge on criminality, if only morally. As far as I know, it was returned to Navarre and released there, after being banded at Magee.

Some thoughts spring to mind: 1) the bird could have been banded at Navarre and then released there—the public can view dozens of Kirtland's warblers on their breeding grounds just a few hours' drive away in Michigan—as I doubt anyone would want to risk this individual just for the sake of seeing it banded; 2) if no licensed banders were present at Navarre to band it there, the bird could simply have been photographed and released unbanded, thereby eliminating the risks involved in transport to Magee; 3) even worse, the persons operating the nets at Navarre may not have identified the bird as a Kirtland's, and unknowingly sent it along with the other more common species over to Magee. Regardless of the thought-process involved, I was personally greatly disappointed by the decision to transport it to Magee, and as you can probably sense, I remain disgusted with the whole scenario. This diatribe isn't meant to condemn bird banding or bird banders, not by a long shot. Nor is it meant to condemn the good-faith efforts over the years on the part of the banding operation in question. But in this case, questions need to be answered. Honest lapses of judgment happen. Let's hope that's all it was in this case.

May 20—Back to birding as it should be—fun. Twenty-two warbler species were still present but eight were represented by only a single individual. Included in these eight were a late orange-crowned warbler and my only Connecticut warbler for the season. Ten mourning warblers were as expected for the date, given a good migrational push. Ten yellow-bellied flycatchers and five alder flycatchers were also in nice but reasonable numbers, while a summer tanager was an unexpected bonus.

May 24—My last day at the Trail this spring. I usually try to make it at least once during early June, if only to be slowly weaned rather than quit cold-turkey. When birders are outnumbered by supercilious beach-goers on the boardwalk, it is time to move on. Not to be dissuaded, however, two olive-sided flycatchers were still present, and 11 species of warblers lingered bravely in the face of the advancing season. And fittingly, my first-ever female Lawrence's warbler, the recessive hybrid of blue-winged and golden-winged warblers, put in an all-too-brief appearance in the shrubbery at the far west end of the parking lot. She popped quickly into view, peeked around for a bit, and then was gone. A fleeting glimpse—spring migration in a nutshell, I should think.

Stately Visitors...

Common Ravens in Ohio: The Past, Present, and Future

by Mike Busam

Common Ravens in Ohio: A Brief History

"The Raven," wrote William Dawson in 1903, "has more dignity, and as a species, less flexibility than the Crow." Tied closely as they were to the once extensive forests of Ohio, it is not surprising that soon after Europeans settled Ohio, ravens began disappearing along with the state's woodlands. By the early 1800s, ravens were no longer to be found in Ohio's central and southern counties, except as occasional wanderers, whereas in northern Ohio they were "still frequently encountered near Cleveland during the 1850s," though by the 1870s that had changed, and ravens were reduced in status to rare winter visitors (Peterjohn 1989).

Ravens clung to the Black Swamp area in northwestern Ohio until the late 1880s, but essentially disappeared from that part of the state between 1900 and 1905 (Peterjohn 1989). In Volume I of *The Birds of Ohio*, Dawson writes of unsubstantiated claims of ravens breeding in Fulton County in the late 1800s, but notes that for all practical purposes "the relentless warfare of the pioneers has thrust [the common raven] almost entirely out of bounds."

And Ohio remained out of bounds to ravens until early 1946. While walking on the frozen Lake Erie near a group of ice fishing shanties, Milton Trautman observed a raven on three separate occasions between 20 January and 6 March. On each occasion, the raven was seen flying from South Bass Island towards Middle Bass Island. "The characteristics of this distinctive species were noted," he wrote (Trautman 1956), "especially the wedge-shaped tail, soaring flight, and croaking voice." On 20 January he was also able to make a direct comparison of the raven with six nearby crows. Fifty-two years would pass before Ohio's next accepted common raven sighting in March of 1998, when once again the species was seen along Lake Erie. A year later, the Ohio Bird Records Committee accepted yet another raven sighting. On top of these two confirmed records have been a few tantalizing, though unconfirmed, sightings, including one from the summer of 1999 at the Egypt Valley Wildlife Area in Belmont County (ODNR news release, 10 Jan 2000).

So given the spate of recent confirmed and possible sightings, can Ohio birders expect to start seeing more common ravens in the future? Will common ravens once again breed in Ohio? Maybe...one thing is for certain, though: populations of breeding common ravens are nearly all around us—"us" being the state of Ohio.

Common Ravens in States Bordering Ohio

Of the five states and one Canadian province bordering Ohio—Michigan, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, and Ontario—only Indiana lacks a population of breeding common ravens. Never truly abundant in the Hoosier State, ravens disappeared completely as breeders by the mid-1890s. Prior to that, the most regular breeding site was a sandstone cliff known as "Ravens Rock," located in southwestern Indiana's Dubois County (Mumford and Keller 1984). The last recorded year for breeding ravens at Ravens Rock was 1894, also the year of the last 19th-century sighting of the

species in northern Indiana. Indiana has only two accepted common raven records this century: in 1919 and in 1953, single ravens were seen along Lake Michigan (Mumford and Keller 1984). Indiana birders have reported additional raven sightings in more recent years, but none was confirmed (Ken Brock, pers. comm.).

Looking to the north, Michigan has a growing raven population in the northern half of the Lower Peninsula and throughout the entire Upper Peninsula, an encouraging trend that generally mirrors the breeding range ravens occupied at the time the state was settled (Brewer *et al.* 1991). Still, the history of common ravens in Michigan has parallels with those in Ohio and Indiana (as well as the other bordering states, for that matter). As Michigan was settled, ravens became scarce before finally disappearing from the southern part of the LP by the end of the 1800s. The last record for Detroit is from 1885 (Julie Craves, Michigan Birds listserv, 15 Feb 2000). Prior to that, ravens were considered to be on even terms with American crows in the Lansing area as late as the 1870s, but 1890 saw the last confirmed nesting pair in the state's southern lower peninsula (Brewer *et al.* 1991).

During the 1940s raven populations in Michigan finally began to bounce back from the effects of logging and human persecution. Their success has been such that ravens are now "widespread and increasing in the northern LP," and increasing in abundance in the UP (Brewer *et al.* 1991).

Pennsylvania ravens, likewise, have also seen the best of times and the worst of times, and are now regaining much of what they surrendered to human encroachment during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first paragraph of the entry for the species in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Pennsylvania* says it all: "Once thought to be nearing extirpation, the Common Raven is currently widespread and locally common in Pennsylvania. It was 'confirmed' as a breeding bird in nearly half of the counties in the state" including breeding sites a mere 40 to 50 miles east of the Ohio border (Brauning 1992). There are possible nest sites in Clarion County, in central western Pennsylvania, but the confirmed breeding sites closest to Ohio are in Warren County, along Lake Erie (Brauning 1992). The return of forests, along with the species' increased tolerance of humans, adjustments to new food sources such as landfills and roadkill, and protection from senseless slaughter are cited as primary factors behind the return of ravens in Pennsylvania, as well as the rest of the northeastern U.S. (Brauning 1992).¹ Breeding Pennsylvania ravens stick almost exclusively to the "Allegheny High Plateau, Allegheny Mountain, and Appalachian Mountain sections," and are "most frequent by far" in the Allegheny High Plateau, in large part because the Susquehanna River and its tributaries have cut into the sandstone "deeply entrenched, rock-walled valleys," which make ideal nesting sites for ravens (Brauning 1992).

In West Virginia, ravens are "regular permanent resident[s] in all mountain counties" along the Appalachians on the state's eastern edge, and there is "breeding evidence throughout the Allegheny Mountains region," while strays are occasionally reported west of the breeding range (Buckelew and Hall 1994). As is the case throughout the Appalachians, ravens are increasing in number in West Virginia. For example, between 1966 and 1987 the ten BBS routes that annually reported common ravens also reported a 12 percent annual increase in the size of the population (Buckelew and Hall 1994).

Common ravens in Kentucky are currently restricted to the Cumberland Mountains in the extreme southeastern section of the state, though ravens have also been

sighted recently in the Cumberland Plateau, an area ravens occupied before their disappearance from Kentucky prior to the 1930s (Mengel 1965, Palmer-Ball 1996). The current breeding population was rediscovered in the southeastern mountains of Kentucky in 1969, and ravens are "usually found along or near the ridge crests" in heavily wooded areas (Palmer-Ball 1996).

**"'Tis some visitor... Only this and nothing more"
Edgar Allen Poe, "The Raven"**

For the better part of this century, Ohio birders have had to accept that in all likelihood common ravens, if located at all, would have to be visitors, and unfortunately nothing more. Unlike the narrator facing the ominous corvine herald in Poe's poem, however, we birders hope that the raven will become something *much* more than just a visitor. With healthy breeding populations up and down the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia and central Pennsylvania, ever so close to Ohio, and with the spate of Ohio sightings in recent years (some verified, some not), it's fair to ask if common ravens might expand their breeding range into the Buckeye State.

In Michigan, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky, ravens reclaimed habitats from which they had once been expelled. While breeding ravens are "flexible," and will nest in diverse locations including in pine trees, on "power lines, on radar towers, on buildings above busy streets, under highway overpasses," etc., they prefer "whenever possible . . . to nest on rock shelves tucked under overhangs on cliffs" (Heinrich 1999). In Ohio, the east-central and southeastern part of the state may offer the most suitable habitat for breeding ravens. Large tracts of forest, fewer people, and steep sandstone cliffs, including those left over from strip mining operations, should make this part of the state particularly attractive to ravens looking for a home. Thus, the unconfirmed raven sighting at Egypt Valley Wildlife Area (in part a reclaimed strip mine) in Belmont County during the 1999 Ohio Grassland Breeding Bird Survey is particularly tantalizing, and offers cause for hope.

**"The ravens' calls were full of promise."
Bernd Heinrich, *Mind of the Raven***

In his introduction to *Mind of the Raven*, Bernd Heinrich writes of a dream he had in which he was walking through a "mysterious forest," drawn towards the "croaking of ravens, one of the most awesome sounds I know." In his dream, writes Heinrich, "the ravens' calls told me that their nest was near. The ravens' calls were full of promise. I felt I was close to something new and exciting, and would find it" (Heinrich 1999).

Ohio birders, too, might be close to something new and exciting, as witnessed by a number of common raven sightings in Ohio between 1994 and 1999. I'll focus here on the two confirmed sightings, but will also take a look at two unconfirmed ones as well, since they come from areas of the state that potentially offer nesting habitat for ravens. Ultimately, these sightings may merely be records of wandering birds. Then again, looking back from some point in the future, they might prove to have been the forerunners of the return of this one-time Ohio native.

Recent Common Raven Sightings in Ohio

"In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore."

Edgar Allen Poe, "The Raven"

On 27 March 1998 at Lake County's Lakeshore Metropark, while watching hawks along the shore, John Pogacnik saw what he initially thought was a buteo—likely a red-tailed hawk, since "it didn't show the dihedral of a rough-legged hawk" (Pogacnik, pers. comm.). He got a better look at the bird as it flew approximately 100 yards off the Lake Erie shoreline, and realized he was watching a raven. Unlike an American crow, this bird was soaring and flying with wingtips angled back. It had a strongly wedge-shaped tail, and "the head and bill were much longer and extended farther in front of the forewing than with crow. The bill was also thicker. The wings were longish and the 'fingers' of the wingtips were angled back" (Pogacnik, OBRC documentation, 31 Mar 1998). Luckily, Pogacnik was able to take a photo of this bird with a 500-millimeter lens as it flew west, "soar[ing] mostly, flapping only occasionally" (Pogacnik, loc cit). For many seasoned raven observers, the manner of flight described by Pogacnik is especially important when separating common ravens from crows. Crows flap almost constantly when flying, whereas ravens often glide, soar, and engage in aerial acrobatics. Ravens are "real masters of the air," notes West Virginia naturalist Jim Phillips (Phillips, pers. comm.).

The Ohio Birds Record Committee accepted the 1998 Lake County sighting, making it the first confirmed common raven sighting in Ohio since Trautman's, also a Lake Erie bird, in 1946.²

Just over a year after the Lake County sighting, David Hochadel observed two ravens in North Bloomfield, Trumbull County, on 4 April 1999.

Like Pogacnik, Hochadel thought he was looking at a raptor when the first of the ravens came into view. "The manner of flight," wrote Hochadel in his documentation, "...was buteo like (to be more specific I would say like a Red-tailed Hawk) with alternate flapping and gliding."

Additionally, the raven's "wings were long and best described as shaped like a large buteo's wings" (Hochadel, OBRC documentation, 4 Apr 1999). Hochadel also noted the wedge-shaped tail, heavy body, shaggy throat feathers, a head that was "thicker/wider than a crow's in proportion to the body," and "massive" bill, "thicker than a crow's, as long as the head itself, and tapered quickly to a point" (Hochadel, loc cit). The bird landed in a fallow field of grasses and weeds, and it was only then that Hochadel realized there was a second bird in the same spot. Though the second bird was partially obscured by vegetation, its head and bill were similar to those of the first raven (Hochadel, loc cit).

In the summer of 1999, the Trumbull County raven sighting was accepted by the OBRC. Two Committee members voted to reject the record, not because they didn't



This common raven flew past Lakeshore Metropark, Lake Co., on 27 March 1998 providing the first confirmed sighting of the species since 1946. Photo by John Pogacnik.

believe the sighting, but rather because they felt more information and additional observers would have helped strengthen the case. For instance, no mention was made of vocalizations on the part of the Trumbull County birds, and in this case there was no photographic documentation. Another OBRC member noted in his comments that he himself had seen ravens in Ohio on two separate occasions in recent years but hadn't sufficient evidence to support either sighting. In any case, after waiting 52 years between confirmed common raven sightings, Ohio birders produced two confirmed sightings within the space of 13 months.

"It's tough to unextirpate something."

In addition to the two confirmed records from 1998 and 1999, there have been a number of reports that haven't been officially accepted, yet which are well worth mention. The most recent such sighting occurred in the summer of 1999. As part of the Ohio Grasslands Breeding Bird Survey, a number of experienced observers were regularly out in the field looking for grassland birds in four wildlife areas located among reclaimed strip mines in the east-central and southeastern part of Ohio (McCormac 1999). These wildlife areas also lie in the heart of Ohio's best potential habitat for breeding ravens. During the summer, two observers sighted a large corvid during survey work at Egypt Valley Wildlife Area in Belmont County. Unfortunately, "the bird was uncooperative" and the two experienced birders who made the observation could get only fleeting looks at the bird (ODNR news release, 10 Jan 2000). Thus the record will remain unconfirmed, but on the heels of the accepted sightings of 1998 and 1999, this interesting sighting underscores the importance of being alert for the possibility that common ravens might be wandering around east-central and southeastern Ohio.

Documentation from another reported raven sighting from southeastern Ohio, this time from Noble County, was submitted to the OBRC in 1994. On 7 March 1994 Ben Morrison noticed a bird soaring directly overhead. He passed it off as a crow, until he and the other birders with him heard the "low guttural croaking" call of a common raven. They watched the bird as it circled overhead, and noticed the "larger-than-crow size and wedge-shaped tail" (Ben Morrison, pers. comm.). In April of 1995, Morrison saw another large corvid on his farm, a half-mile from the site of the 1994 sighting. While the bird was silent, it flew so close to Morrison that he "could see the large beak and that it was definitely larger than a crow" (Morrison, pers. comm.).

Morrison's 1994 sighting was not accepted by the OBRC. He remarks that "at the time the [common] raven was considered extirpated and it's tough to unextirpate something" (Morrison, pers. comm.). And it's true. The burden of proof in sightings of unusual and rare birds falls squarely on the observer, which underscores again the necessity to take very detailed field notes of any unusual species one encounters, particularly when it concerns one regarded as extirpated. Even when an observer does the legwork and gathers the notes, it's no guarantee that a sighting will be accepted, but at least the work will be on record, providing important and useful evidence for those reviewing Ohio's ornithological record in the future.

The Noble and Belmont County raven sightings, though unconfirmed, are striking when considered in light of the two accepted records from 1998 and 1999. Couple these sightings with the general expansion of raven populations in the eastern United States, the availability of suitable habitat, particularly in east-central and southeastern

Ohio, and a strong case can be made that sometime—maybe soon, maybe not so soon—Ohio may once again be graced by the presence of breeding common ravens. We can only hope that common ravens will be mere visitors to Ohio no more, but return to live among us forever.

Separating Common Raven and American Crow in the Field

Readers who have spent a lot of time in “raven country” might find the idea of mistaking an American crow for a common raven, or vice versa, laughable. Nonetheless, field identification of common ravens in Ohio, where crows are the ruling corvid, and common ravens extremely rare at best, requires an observer to provide a wealth of detail to support his or her sighting. Scattered throughout this article are a few “nuggets” pertaining to raven identification, and particularly to separation of common ravens from American crows. Following are a few ID tips collected from a number of experienced raven watchers. Some of the pointers repeat information mentioned in the sighting accounts above. Included as well are additional ID tips not singled out as supporting evidence in the reports submitted for Ohio’s recent raven sightings, but that are useful characteristics to look for should you encounter a wandering corvid that might be, could be, a common raven.

Size is usually the first characteristic to look for. Crows are, well, crow-sized. In contrast, at first glance a raven is going to appear very large—as large as a *buteo* or a vulture. To give some perspective, ravens measure approximately 20-25 percent larger than crows. Ravens average in size from 22-26”, with an average length of 24”. American crows average 16-21”, and their average length is around 18” (Rick Baetsen, pers. comm.). So, in Ohio, an observer encountering a common raven is more likely at first glance to think “hmm...dark raptor,” rather than, “oh, wow, that’s a large crow!”

Another characteristic, a nuance that might be difficult to discern in the field unless conditions are right, is the manner in which ravens take to the air. “When ravens take flight from the ground they invariably take a step or two to get airborne. (Crows can jump directly up from the ground to become airborne, by contrast)” (David Dister, pers. comm.). Ron Pittaway of Ontario suggests that “wing-tail flicking” is a good way to separate crows from ravens in the field. It’s also useful because wing-tail flicking can be seen from a considerable distance. “Crows habitually flick their folded wings and fan their tails...one to three times, especially just after perching,” Pittaway notes, whereas ravens “occasionally slowly shuffle their wings,” a behavior that doesn’t approach the rapid wing-tail flicking of crows. Furthermore, Pittaway explains that wing-tail flicking is also found in northwestern, Tamaulipas, and fish crows, but not in common or Chihuahuan ravens. However, he warns that “the absence of [tail-wing] flicking is not completely diagnostic of ravens, but since crows do it so frequently, its absence is a strong clue” (Pittaway 1997).

In flight, the wedge-shaped tail of the raven helps separate it from the American crow. Crows’ tails, on the other hand, are fan-shaped, and not nearly so distinctly wedged as raven tails. There is also a marked difference in the manner of flight. Ravens are aerial acrobats. Pairs of ravens—both juveniles and mated adults—often engage in “sky-dancing.” Wrote Dawson in 1903: “Each spring the birds indulge in amorous antics which are decidedly *infra dig.*, turning somersaults in the air, turning to

fly on their backs, etc. Additionally, ravens soar and glide in a manner of which the average crow can only dream.” Yet another unique raven flight mannerism is “wing-tipping,” in which a raven seems to suddenly tumble out of the sky, “simultaneously tipping (or tucking in) just one wing that tilts the body to the side” (Heinrich 1999).

The raven’s voice is very distinctive, and its vocalizations more varied than the crow’s standard “caw.” Raven vocalizations tend to be hoarse-sounding calls that sound like “cronk” or “crock” or “croak” (Baetsen, pers. comm.). In other words, “Ravens croak, honk, gurgle and more, but they do not ‘caw’” (Pittaway 1997).

An observer be lucky enough to get a good, close look at a raven will note that the raven’s bill is much larger and thicker than that of the crow. Additionally, ravens have distinctly shaggy throat feathers, which stand out from the rest of the breast and upper throat, whereas the feathers on the throats of crows are smooth (Baetsen, pers. comm.).

Ravens tend to be more solitary than crows. Typical sightings, even in areas where ravens breed, are usually of just one or two birds. Jim Phillips does note that around the 4th of July, when ravens fledge, sightings of between 3 and 5 are not uncommon (Phillips, pers. comm.). Crows are more gregarious, often occurring in numbers larger than family groups. While young ravens are known to gather in social groups of various sizes in the colder months after leaving their parents, ravens as a general rule are never present in anywhere near the large numbers often encountered among crows, either in roosts or in foraging bands.³ Had the narrator of “The Raven” been visited by a crow, he’d probably have had at least a dozen others rapping at his chamber door immediately thereafter (in which case, he’d have had a murder on his hands in addition to his waking nightmare over Lenore). Instead, he was confronted by but one raven.



This common raven close-up was taken in Michigan’s Antrim County in 1994. Note the massive bill shrouded in feathers. Photo copyright © Rick Baetsen.

NOTES

¹ Bernd Heinrich has investigated the theory that ravens have adapted to feeding on roadkill, and that this has contributed to their distribution and abundance, but regards his data as inconclusive. Other researchers, Heinrich notes, note that common ravens often appear at golden eagle kills, and have been seen flushing prey for peregrine falcons, and then eating the leftovers. According to Heinrich, "the ravens and roadkill study has a long way to go...It also suggests (but does not prove) that if most raptor-kills immediately attract a raven or two, then it is because they cue in on the hunter itself, not just the dead animal." However, notes Heinrich, "roadkills are undoubtedly an important food supplement for some individual ravens" who have developed the habit of searching for them. Heinrich believes that ravens are finely attuned to the behavior of raptors and other carnivores, and that they have learned in particular to follow raptors to find food (Heinrich 1999).

² In 1999, while watching birds from his backyard, Pogacnik saw another interesting corvid flying approximately a quarter of a mile offshore over Lake Erie. Initially, he thought this bird was an eagle, but a look through a spotting scope showed it was a "corvid species," possibly a raven. Pogacnik wasn't able to see enough detail on the bird to report the sighting, but he found this particular bird interesting because, whether or not it was a common raven, he had "never seen a crow even 100 feet from the shoreline" in the eight years he'd been living along the lake (John Pogacnik, pers. comm.).

³ Jim Phillips notes what is in his experience a singular exception to the general rule that ravens don't flock in the large numbers for which crows are known. In November of 1999, Phillips was hawkwatching on Peters Mountain in West Virginia when 66 ravens flew by at the same time. "Some were harassing a golden eagle, others a red-tail. Some seemed to be playing with each other. They were all heading south" (Phillips, pers. comm.).

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Revised Ohio Checklist Available

ODNR's Division of Natural Areas and Preserves has just issued a revised Checklist of the Birds of Ohio. Produced in collaboration with the Ohio Bird Records Committee, it supplies the latest accurate information on Ohio's official list of 406 bird species. For each, it notes breeding status, native/introduced status, and the nature of the evidence verifying its occurrence (i.e., specimen, photograph, or written documentation). For each highlighted Review Species, it additionally includes the year of the species' most recent confirmed occurrence.

The initial press run of the May 1999 edition of the Checklist has been exhausted for some time. This revised edition includes a few corrections and all changes made necessary through 15 June 2000. There is no more accurate list of Ohio's avifauna. Printed on durable stock, it is more than a field checklist; it is a valuable reference that contains a wealth of information in a handy form.

A copy of the checklist is available free of charge by writing to Jim McCormac, ODNR-DNAP, 1889 Fountain Sq., Bldg F-1, Columbus, OH 43224-1331, calling (614) 265-6440, or via e-mail at jim.mccormac@dnr.state.oh.us.