

CROWS IN OUR HANDS

BY JOHN PAUL BARRETT

Sometimes when I'm washing the dishes I seem to perceive a dark flash at the edge of my sight. It's always on the right side, just beyond the window with a view of my workshop. It's as though a crow was flying around in there, but there isn't. Not anymore.

This sensation of a shadowy flutter (which I know comes from within, and is only a visual trick of my memory) nevertheless often brings forth a small inward sigh, a faint smile maybe. There HAVE been crows flying around out there, lots of them.

Before the first crow's arrival neither Tricia nor I had paid much attention to crows. Our lives had included many animals — but no crows.

I saw and heard about crows when I was growing up in Texas. I knew they were considered crop-eating pests by most farmers, and were destroyed as vermin by the thousands, by a wide variety of methods. I always liked them, perhaps for their outlaw reputation.

We live a few miles outside Astoria, Oregon, a fairly remote little town up by the mouth of the Columbia River. (I've heard it said this isn't the end of the earth, but you can see it from here; I think they're talking about Washington State, just across the river.)

I was just returning home from a two-hour trip south to Cannon Beach, where I had sold — and been paid for — about \$350 worth of my hand-bound books.* I could hardly wait to show Tricia the checks. It's a great feeling to sell one's own books. My head was full of happy thoughts when I pulled into our driveway. The money had long been earmarked, but at least I could feel it pass through my hands momentarily. I was smiling. It was a beautiful day.

But Tricia didn't look happy. I can always tell. It looked bad. She was sitting on the bench by the little fishpond-fountain in our front yard. And something was definitely wrong.

"Hi, Babe," I said, hoping my cheery tone might lift her spirits. Not a chance. It was bad.

I gave her a hug. "What's wrong?"

"Phone bill." Her voice was very soft and even. It was bad.

"Well, how bad can it be?"

"Go look at it," she said flatly. This was really serious.

I steeled myself. I took some comfort in the checks in my pocket, my "armor" against just such a thing. I was sure I would be able to make everything okay again.

The phone bill was \$326 and neither of us had called anyone.

However, I had recently acquired my first computer and had just got hooked up to the internet. I didn't know it yet, but the fly-by-night thief who sold the computer to me and installed it had also hooked me up to a fly-by-night thief (now defunct) internet service provider (ISP). The first thief had told me the per-minute charge for my online use would be 3 to 6 cents. It turned out to be 12 to 18 cents per minute instead. I'd been expecting a large phone bill of about \$125, since I'd spent lots of time on the net at first, but this bill nearly buckled me at the knees.

I took a deep breath. Quick math. \$326 was less than \$350. The daydreams I'd enjoyed on the drive home were, after all, only daydreams. I rushed over to Tricia. I had the power to make this awful bummer go away for her. A run of medical problems and pain had given her far more than enough to deal with. She didn't need this.

"Babe, it's okay," I said, drawing the checks from my shirt pocket and wagging them out for her to see. "I'll deposit these and I'll just pay it. Problem solved." (I did not allude to any of the other things for which the money had been allocated.)

I thought I saw a change in her demeanor. The problem was solved. We'd figure out what happened later. I was certain there'd been some mistake, that the bill *had* to be in error, but it was covered. Just a piece of bad luck and a lucky streak quirkily occurring simultaneously to cancel one another out.

I sat down next to her. "Okay?" (I hate it when she's bummed out.)

She gave me a faint smile. I breathed a sigh. It was going to be all right.

"Hey, you guys. Look what I've got!"

It was Mike, our neighbor. He was carrying a cardboard box.

Since Tricia works at an animal clinic it's not unusual for people to bring pets to her for advice, but when Mike opened the



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT LANGHAM III

box we were both surprised to see what looked at first to me like a fuzzy, scrawny little gray-black chicken.

"It's a crow," Mike said, "Must've fallen outta the nest. The cat was about to get him. I figured you guys would know what to do with him."

Mike had been doing some yardwork for a friend in a nearby town when he found them. There had been two, and this was the survivor.

We took the little creature inside and carefully looked him over. He was so tiny, so vulnerable-looking. We wondered if we'd be able to feed him, and what little crows needed to eat. We'd fed the young pigeons bread softened in water, and scrambled eggs, so we tried that. The crow accepted it eagerly, simultaneously emitting the most endearing "gobbling baby" noise we'd ever heard. It was just the first of many pleasant sounds this crow would make for us.

We both fell in love with the little crow almost instantly, and he began to occupy a significant portion of our lives, our conversations with each other and our friends.

It was a lot like having a human child.

At the beginning Tricia and I agreed the crow would be a wild creature; that when it could fly well enough to evade danger and fend for itself outside, we would have to give it the option of freedom. The pigeons we'd raised and released had all come back to us for months before finally making the transition to completely wild — that is, with no human contact at all. Therefore, we felt we had some reason to expect the crow might choose to hang out around us (and the food source) for a while longer. We didn't know what to expect, but we knew we had no intention of making a pet out of a wild creature. We did not want a pet, trained or tame crow. We just wanted to give this little rook the chance to live a crow's life, and to enjoy its company for awhile.

One night in bed we were discussing the ethics of what we were doing with the crow. Was it illegal to keep a crow? We decided that technically it probably was illegal, but we weren't keeping the crow as a pet, and were raising and releasing it into the wild.

Oregon has a crow hunting season which begins in October. No bag limit. How could it be illegal to save a crow's life, but legal to kill it? We decided our moral imperative took precedence over the law in this particular case.

"But maybe we're interfering with the crow's destiny? Maybe it wasn't *supposed* to survive," I said.

Tricia told me it was surely and obviously the crow's destiny to come to us, as well as ours to receive it, and how could I disagree with such irrefutable logic? (Tricia has this way of cutting to the essence and making perfect sense of almost any concept in one brief sentence and making me feel like a complete idiot.)

We called the crow — all of them — "Crow." No human names for a wild bird.

For a variety of reasons, some of which I'll explain later, we were convinced the first crow was female and began to refer to her as such.

The little thing could barely stand, but she made it quite clear what she wanted: food. She seemed to be half-beak, a tiny rather scrawny-looking body, a baby dinosaur with this huge, open mouth, squawking loudly. We fed her, and fed her, and... etc. She was insatiable, and it only took her a few minutes to run whatever she'd just eaten through her little system and pump it out with great regularity: a little poop machine. We didn't mind.

We put her in a box of cedar chips, with a towel, a bowl of water, and another bowl into which we mindlessly placed everything we could think of a little hungry crow might possibly want to eat. But it didn't take long for us to realize that little crows require hand-feeding. There could be no doubt what was wanted and where it was supposed to go. She ate almost everything we gave her, even a couple of fat, wriggly worms once, just once. She eventually seemed to prefer things such as the most expensive canned dog food available.

Although Crow was destined to be free, at this point she was still a baby, and needed to be fed and protected. We had a good cage, which I'd designed and built for the pigeons several years before. It was made of 2x2s and chickenwire, about 2½ feet wide by about 2 feet tall and deep; plenty of room for a little crow.

We placed her on the perch, but she wasn't quite ready for perching, so we lowered the perch to within her reach, and let her just sit in the cedar at the bottom. Within a few days she had learned how to gain and hold the perch and that's where she stayed most of the time... for the next few days anyway; it soon became clear that the crow did not like being confined in the cage all the time. She would beat her wings against the sides, demanding freedom, refusing to be confined, until we opened the door. After that the crow was into everything. She went will-

ingly to her cage at night, but during the day she had full run of the workshop adjacent to our house.

The most impressive single thing about baby Crow was her big mouth, which always seemed to be open and from which came a very loud and insistent squawking, which ceased only when her belly was full. Crow had a big voice for such a tiny creature.

I fed her with chopsticks. Tricia preferred to feed her by hand, pushing the food down her throat as a mother crow would. It seemed to make little difference to the crow. She was more than eager to get the food either way. We fed her the most nutritious things we could think of, it was hard to find anything she didn't like, but *nothing* satisfied her for more than an hour. Her caw was unignorable; we could hear it throughout the house. We fed her in shifts. It was demanding, but never a chore. It was a delight. It was fun and it was impossible not to smile the whole time. She was almost always hungry if it had been more than an hour since we'd fed her, and she did not hesitate to let us know. She was as demanding of our time as any infant — but we didn't have to change diapers, only the box, frequently. Baby crows poop a lot and very often. However, unlike human babies, crows are silent from dusk to dawn.

Mercifully.

The crow thrived and was soon able to fly about at will. We had no idea how to determine the sex of a crow, but we had a strong feeling this one was female. I can't quite explain this rationally, but it was "confirmed" by an independent source of unquestionable purity: my then 3 year old niece, Lara. When I asked her if she thought the crow was a boy or a girl, she said without hesitation and in a slightly dismissive tone, "It's a girl," as though it should be obvious to everyone.

We figured, given the factors of feminine intuition and the innocence of a child, there was much better than an even chance that little Lara was probably right on the money. All of which explains why, though I can offer neither concrete nor logical reason for it, I refer to the first crow as "she." There was just something feminine about her. I learned later that there is really no certain method by which crows may be sexed in the wild, and in captivity mostly by comparison.

According to internationally recognized corvid expert Dr. Kevin J. McGowan, Associate Curator of Birds & Mammals at Cornell University, male crows are slightly longer than females. In answer to my question: "Is there a way to easily determine the sex of a mature crow?" he said: "No, not easily. Males tend to be larger than females, but there is much overlap in all the characters. In my population tail length is the highest loader into the discriminant function I have developed (100% accuracy, at least so far). I cannot, however, distinguish the sexes by tail length in the field. Bill length is the second biggest difference, and I can accurately distinguish some crows using this. The biggest males and the smallest females can be picked out, but the middle bunch (most of the population?) are not distinguishable."

Sounds like a Professor, doesn't he?

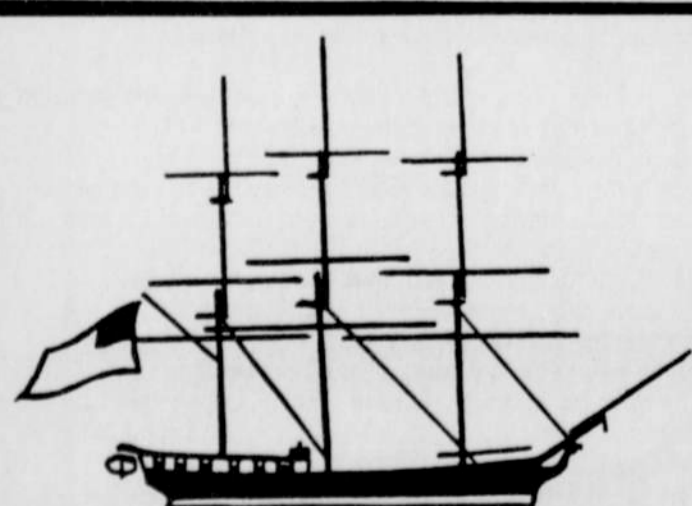
I also asked: "What is your best estimate of a crow's normal life span?"

His reply: "Hard to say exactly, but the oldest known wild crow was just shy of 30 years old. Most probably live 10 years. I've still got 6 year old crows at home with their parents, so they must live a good long time."

I then inquired about books on crows, and was a little surprised at his comment: "...there is little to no good information available on crows in books at this moment."

Hmmm.

*John Paul Barrett is the author of *Sea Stories I & II (Of Dolphins & Dead Sailors; Sungods & Sundogs)* and has just published his newest book, *Crows in Our Hands*, from which this has been excerpted. He is the founder of Gaff Press, which publishes his books. As with every other book of his, he has personally prepared *Crows* for publication through every process of desktop publishing. The book is for sale at \$20 at local coastal bookstores.



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