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Wild SIDE CROWS

By LYNETTE RAE McADAMS
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Clever, audacious and persistent on the one hand; brash, destructive and annoying on the other. In one place, venerated as a messenger of the divine; in the next, perceived as a harbinger of death.

No matter your opinion of the common crow (and every person seems to have one), this much is certain: Whether condemned or adored, revered or reviled, Corvus has managed to wing its way into nearly every land and culture on the globe, leaving its dichotomous but indelible mark at each new turn.

Belonging to the family Corvidae, this genus encompasses more than 40 different species of crows as well as ravens, rooks and jackdaws. All close cousins, and practically indistinguishable except for size and subtle color variations, these medium-large birds are recognized everywhere by their deeply black, iridescent feathers, broad bills and hoarse, distinctive voices.

Originating out of central Asia, where ancient mythology equated them with nothing less than the almighty Sun itself, Corvus now inhabits every region of the Earth but South America and Antarctica. Highly adaptable, and therefore considered some of the planet's most successful inhabitants, these birds have made themselves at home in fields and forests, on farms and in cities, up in the mountains, out in the desert, and down by the sea. Essentially, everywhere they go, they thrive.

Reaching sexual maturity at about 3 (with males taking a little longer),



PHOTO BY LYNETTE RAE McADAMS

A crow on the Astoria Riverwalk

crows seek out partners that typically become mates for life, sharing equally in domestic responsibilities. Socially advanced, they can form tight-knit family groups, with nestlings often lingering for several years to help raise future siblings. In the wild, the life of an average crow spans seven to 10 years, with some species living up to 20. In captivity, the oldest corvid on record died at age 59.

Famous for their intelligence and cunning, crows and their kin have one of the highest brain-to-body ratios in the animal kingdom, approaching that of the primates. Such advanced development has allowed them to hone communications and solve complicated problems, even going so far as to craft and use tools to secure food and other resources.

In one recent Seattle study, a group of scientists disguised themselves in masks and abducted seven crows. Months after releasing them, the crows were still able to recognize and remember their captors, and attacked on sight. Even more surprising, the crows weren't content to keep the insult to themselves, but spread word of the offense to others in

their group. Three years later, new generations of crows could still recognize the masks and take appropriate revenge, proving that the experiences of their elders had become not only common knowledge but, in fact, the stuff of Corvid legend.

Culturally, crows have accompanied the stories and artwork of humanity for at least 30,000 years, when we first started scribbling on cave walls.

Worldwide, evidence of their importance is also revealed in folklore and literature. The ancient Aesop included their conniving antics in several famous fables, Shakespeare wrote them into his plays, and even today the acclaimed poet Mary Oliver exalts their ubiquity, hailing them "the deep muscle of the world."

Most recently — and perhaps most importantly — Corvus has reclaimed its timeless role as an enduring symbol of omniscience, appearing as the "three-eyed crow" in a major plot line of the fantasy book series, "A Song of Ice and Fire," by George R.R. Martin. In the hit HBO television adaptation, "Game of Thrones," the character is changed to a three-eyed raven. 