

Wildlife Express!

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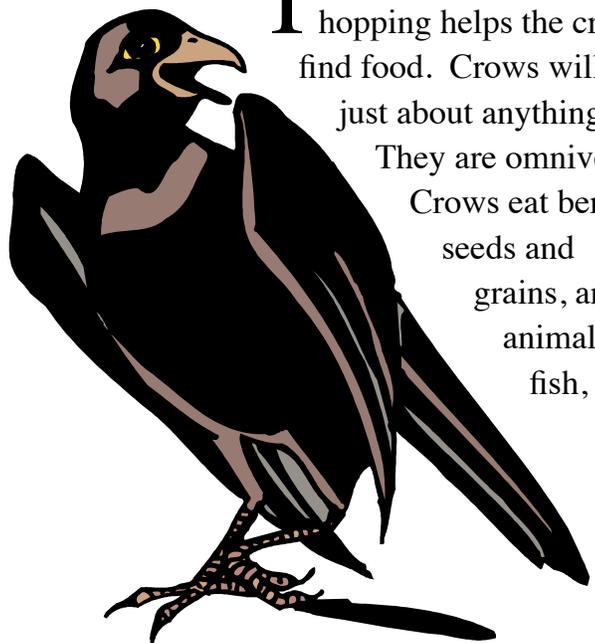


Meet the Crow

No matter where you live in Idaho, you have probably seen a crow. This large, bold, black bird is found all over our state. Crows are one of the most widespread birds in North America. A big reason for this is people. We have changed the landscape in ways that make it better for crows. Crows like open spaces with scattered trees. If that sounds familiar, look around your community. City parks, cemeteries, vacant lots, backyards, schoolyards, golf courses, farmland, pastures, campgrounds, and shorelines are perfect places for crows to live.

Crows are easy to spot. They are large birds that stand almost up to your knee. Their wings are about the size of your classroom desks pushed together. Adult crows are a beautiful glossy black. Young crows are not as glossy and have a brownish tint to their wings and tail. Crows spend a lot of time looking for food on the ground. They waddle when they walk and will also hop.

This waddling and hopping helps the crow find food. Crows will eat just about anything! They are omnivores. Crows eat berries, seeds and grains, and animals like fish, small



mammals, birds, and invertebrates like insects and crayfish. They even eat dead animals, called carrion (CARRY-on) and garbage---yuck! Crows find their food using their bill to flip over leaves, stones or bark or to dig into the ground. They will even wade into water to catch small fish, crayfish, clams or other aquatic animals. Sometimes, crows will work together to steal food from another animal.

Crows need to spend a lot of time finding food, especially during the nesting season. Crows nest in the spring. The mated pair builds a nest on a well-hidden branch, high in a tree. The outer part of the nest is made of branches. Soft materials like grass, moss, hair and fur are used to line the nest. Three to seven bluish-green eggs are laid and incubated by the female. During the nesting cycle, something unusual happens. Many crow pairs have “helper” crows. These helpers are their offspring from the year before. They help feed the female as she incubates. Helpers also feed and protect the nestlings. They even help keep the nest clean. When helper crows are two years old, they will leave their parents, find a mate and raise their own babies.

Watch and listen for crows. Their loud “caw-caw” is easy to recognize. But be aware because crows also imitate owls, dogs, cats, geese and even humans! This is one more reason why crows are so fascinating.

Corvids

Pinyon Jay



© Mike Morrison

Black-billed Magpie



Pinyon Jay



© Mike Morrison

Crows are part of a family of birds called corvids. This group also includes ravens, jays, magpies, and nutcrackers. Twenty species of corvids live in North America. Idaho is home to eight different kinds of corvids.

As a group, corvids are large birds. Ravens are the largest, weighing two pounds, twice as much as a crow. Jays are the smallest, but are still 11 – 12 inches long. Jays are also the most colorful, often blue with some white and gray. All corvids have strong feet and bills. These help to open tough food like nuts or clams. Their lower jaw has a special structure that acts to brace the jaw against the bird's skull. This allows the bird to use its jaw like a chisel to open hard items.

Corvids often store or cache (CASH) their food. Idaho's Clark's nutcracker is well known for its ability to cache and then find food stored in thousands of locations. Since nutcrackers forget some of their caches, this activity is an important way that seeds are spread over the land.

Corvids are also known for their intelligence. Ravens and magpies are able to recognize up to seven groups of different objects. This is like your understanding of the difference between seven groups of different candies. Ravens have problem-solving abilities. Scientists studied ravens that were given a piece of food tied to the end of a string. Without ever seeing it before and with no practice, the ravens were able to figure out how to reach the food by using their beak and feet to reel in the string and get the food. Pretty impressive for a bird- brain! Crows are also very intelligent. They have learned to open hard objects like nuts and clams by dropping them on hard surfaces like roads. Crow parents will break off pinecones and throw them down on a person or animal climbing toward their nest. They can even identify individual people based on their experience with that person. If you have been feeding a crow, it will recognize you in a positive way. If you have been pestering a crow or trying to bother its nest, it will let you know that it is not happy to have you around!

Omnivores

Do you know an animal that eats both animals and plants? How about a bear or a raccoon or a crow or a skunk? These animals are omnivores. They eat both animals and plants. Having a varied diet makes it easier to find food. When it is summer, omnivores can eat insects, berries, grasses, flowers, other animals, fish, and much more. Once autumn and winter arrive, some of these foods disappear. But omnivores can switch their diet to eat what is available. This makes omnivores generalists. They do not need special foods.

Omnivores have special adaptations to help them eat a variety of foods. Their mouths are filled with different teeth. If you run your tongue over your teeth, what do they feel like? Those big flat molars in the back of your mouth are for grinding up plants. Plants are pretty tough

and hard to digest. Being able to chew them properly helps make it easier to digest them. What about the sharper teeth toward the front of your mouth? Those are for tearing and biting. When you take a bite of pizza, you use these sharp incisors and canine teeth to cut through your food. If you did not have those teeth, it would be harder to eat. Teeth can tell you a lot about an animal's diet.

Since birds do not have teeth, omnivorous birds, like crows, eat small stones. These stones stay in their gizzard, a tough muscle that grinds up the bird's food. The stones help grind the food as the muscles in the gizzard work. Being omnivorous means that you get to enjoy many different kinds of food, but aren't you glad you do not need to eat stones!

Scavengers

One of the reasons that crows are so common is because they are willing to eat anything. This includes things that we think are pretty disgusting like garbage and decomposing animals.

Common Raven



© Catherine Zinsky

Crows scavenge when a large food source is available. Crows feeding at a garbage dump are an example. Scavenging can also be an important way to find food when other food sources are gone. Winter can be a hard time to find food. This is when you often see crows scavenging on a dead animal. Crows have strong beaks, but they have a hard time breaking the skin of a dead deer or elk. They leave this job up to stronger scavengers such as golden eagles or coyotes. Once those scavengers leave, the crows can feed on the dead animal.

We may think scavenging is gross, but scavengers play an important role in nature. Can you imagine all the dead animals lying around if there were no scavengers? The smell alone would be enough to make us glad scavengers do what they do. Without them, important nutrients and minerals would not be recycled into other animals and plants. It may not be a role we want to play, but scavengers are important members of the cycle of life.

Let's Get Together!

Many animals stick together in groups. A group of crows is called a murder. Schools of fish, herds of deer or elk, packs of wolves, flocks of geese, hives of bees, hanging with a crowd is the way to go. What is the big deal about being in a group? Scientists have several explanations for this behavior.

The first involves protection. More eyes mean it is easier to spot danger. Crows often have a sentinel that keeps an eye out for danger while the rest of the flock feeds. If danger approaches, the sentinel gives an alarm call, and the crows can fly away to safety. A group of animals makes it harder for predators to single out one animal. Crows and other birds often work together to drive away predators. Great horned owls are the crows' greatest enemy. When crows find an owl, they often pester it until the owl leaves the area. This is called mobbing. One scientist found 136 crows mobbing one great horned owl. Talk about ganging up!

Food is another reason to stick together. With more animals looking for food, it is more likely that everyone will eat. Crows often roost with hundreds, thousands or sometimes millions of other crows at night. In the morning, crows can follow others that know of a good food source. This way, the entire group finds food.

Black-billed Magpie



© Mike Morrison

Steller's Jay



© Mike Morrison

Be Outside: Get Out And Garden!



Spring is a great time to get outside and dig in the dirt! Why not give gardening a try? Planting a garden is a great family activity. When you grow your own vegetables, they just taste better. You might find out that you like broccoli after planting and tending it!

The first step is to meet with your family to discuss the kind of garden you want to grow. A wildflower garden is a perfect way to attract hummingbirds and native insects such as butterflies. Vegetable gardens can add healthy foods to your meals. Check out the space in your yard. Where is it sunny for most of the day? Can you easily water your garden? Will you need a small fence to keep your dog from investigating the garden? What is your soil like? Once you decide these things, you can plan what to plant.

Wildflower gardens have become very popular. Once they are established, they require little work. Native wildflowers are adapted to your local climate, so they will need less water and fertilizer. This makes caring for them easier. They will also attract more native insects, because the insects are adapted to using these flowers. A wildflower garden can be tucked into a very small space.

This lets you have several small patches of wildflowers in your yard.

Vegetable gardens are a great way to get your veggies! It is fun to plant seeds and then watch for the moment a little green shoot appears from the soil. As the plants grow, you will be able to pick vegetables. It is just like magic! The Internet and library have resources for you to use to help with all parts of gardening from planting to harvesting and cooking. Who knew playing in the dirt could be so much fun?



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Crow Word Search

BLACK
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CARRION
CAW
CORVID
CROW
GIZZARD
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HOPPING
IMITATE
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SCAVENGER
SMART

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