

## THE BEHAVIOR OF CROWS

By Michael Roloff

1] Best friend "Yellow Foot," so I call him for the yellow band 'round his lower left leg [courtesy department of crows] is walking me, he hurriedly, I accommodatingly laid back, across the library court yard, swaying his much-envied, many-layered, many-feathered being, weightily, self-importantly, from left to right, a sailor on a drunken ship, locking his keen right eye on my left coat pocket, with that "what's up, no cookies today?" kind of look as we round the corner by the bicycle racks... my habitué of morsels, who knows where I keep left-over bread and such like, but not enough of a familiar yet to snatch it: even after a year of handouts he keeps his distance, one human foot, six crow paces or three crow hops off, perhaps he recalls his Egyptian captivity in the crow department, still skittish, though demanding. He clucks at me, he natters, he gargles. I assume these to be flattering, seductive communications. If I should caw back, he might take fright, as have many of his brethren. I seem to misspeak or mispronounce their tongue. "Tomorrow," I explain to the insatiable beast, "really, I am sorry, I forgot." He gurgles. I push the automatic entry. The door opens. I look back through the glass. He looks forlorn as am I when he doesn't show - has he succumbed to the flue, has a hawk got him, did he have an unfortunate encounter with a vehicle? Ah, there he is, cleaning his beak of peanut butter in the grass. And walks or flies off, whereas I engross myself in books.

"Oh, child of mine,  
How perfectly you clean your beak after you've made an extracted from the ground...  
"How you soften that hard-tack in rainwater pond...  
"How you thwart dehydration...  
"How you suffer under the heat, keeping your maw open for ventilation... and there is nothing I can do but give you water...  
"How your head bobs back and forth in perfect rhythm with your paces...  
"Just like a pigeon, aeh?"  
"No no, God forbid, far less obsessively than a pigeon."  
"How you use your wings to feather yourself as you break when you swoop to land"  
"Better than any plane, aeh?"  
"For sure, inimitably better! My perfect crow! All of them perfect! Perfect examples of perfection!"

Sometimes, sitting on the bench at the courtyard entrance, keeping an eye out for him to fly in from the deep dark green stand of conifers across the way, as I know he does there wait for me when I walk by below, he surprises me, a black brick plummets from the brink of high court yard rim, breaking his fall at the last amazing, whoosh, elegant upswing moment, better than any *Stuka* [i.e. Sturzkampf Flieger] ever did. Sometimes a collection of his or her brethren up there just caw and caw and caw. When I overfeed him he squirrels the morsels away. I've seen him outsmart a squirrel for a French fry at a garbage can. I prefer to feed him cellophane wrapped saltine crackers, rapt in admiration of his dexterity, one foot planted on the transparency, his black funnel of a beak, perfect for picking grubs, breaks the membrane, just a few deft pecks, then he eats the shatter of crackers: A great sequence for a saltine cracker ad: The two-and-1/2-inch, square, yellowish pack looks admirable stuck squarely in his beak as he flies off with the treasure Airborne Express, when he feels more like opening it elsewhere or sequestering than over-filling his gut. Sometimes, I am feeding him, a half-dozen brethren fly in from across the street, from the stand of splendid conifers that surround the department of forestry very forest dark brown woody buildings. The brethren position themselves on the nearby acorn trees and on the sidewalk, and squawk and bellow at me, each small black bellows pumps itself full of outrage and then emits, lighting the embers in my soul: I could not agree more, and manage to smile at myself as though that will do the trick - it does if I am in the thick, their fury subsides. They are greedy, they load up, they do not share but with their young who exploit them with plaintive "I haven't eaten for a crow's age, I am starved to death" cries even if mom and dad have just stuffed them. When you come on a dead fledgling, dropped out of its nest, unretrieved, you notice ontogenesis recapitulate phylogenises most hideously. Thus there is "Blue Foot", "Rainbow

Foot", "Red Foot", "Red and Yellow".... I have no other way of keeping them apart, can't tell male from female, except of course for the not yet full grown, the slighter ones, the fledglings whose plaintive demanding, the deep dark red hungry inside of their maws... who remind me of my own baby hood.

One time, in my early days in town, during a walk-about, I must have said the wrong thing, made the wrong sound, struck the wrong note, a gang pursued me, block after block, for blocks on end... screaming at me, no let up, until I finally shook them hiding inside a shed by the water front... "You pissed them off," J.B. a tough hippy friend of the Crow Indian persuasion said the obvious. Oh were they pissed! And it was summer...oh were they scolding me... but for what? I am still scratching my head for being so miserably misunderstood, all I had done was try to talk to them, engage them in conversation, no saying "sorry" could repair... dogs understand me all the time.

Right on the sidewalk outside the Plaza Café two brethren pounced on a third and pinned him! Really, like two hold up artists street gangsters, until some friends came to help the victim out and shooed the holdup artists away. Or was it two crop cops pinning the victim from some infraction. For an infraction of some kind there had certainly been to elicit the all around gangland behavior.

2] Like a Mongol horde they pour out of the 100,000 seat stadium at the break of light, a sky black with crows, disperse into armadas that fly off to bomb the different neighborhoods! The departure of a veritable sky-darkening swarm of them at dawn, their first spot, for a mass congregation, for the turf worm [?], for a massive mass overseen by which pope of crows, do they all bless each other after a good nite's rest in their nests in the Arboretum? A secondary congregation point, for one of the armadas, something like a battalion strong, lies a mile off to the north, there they set down again after such a short flight, at the far end of the huge macadam of the parking lot, black on black, and seem to need to discuss who gets to go to nearby University Village five by five block shopping eateries, who gets assigned which trash can... garbage can assignation time. I am not privy to these discussion, I just hear the racket of a thousand crows chatting it up, I merely notice the further divvying up into squadrons... their jealous territoriality, the several taking up of individual perches, the higher the better, the occasional fight for the perch on a lamp post with a gull. And some of them just flying about, this way and that, perhaps scouting the ground. Crows and gulls do not mesh at all. Gulls will gang up on a feeding crow and vice versa. The attempt to dislodge the place holder, diving straight at it, but then, playing chicken, barely grazing it with one wing... me too, the whoosh of their feathers, especially in spring as they dive down at you, hysterically protecting their young in invisible nests high above. One day, on the trail, looking up into the gloom, my eyes seeking out a berating couple, one hit me right between the eyes, did I ever feel lucky as I congratulated them on their aim. Moreover, sea gulls don't seem to keep regular hours, when do they sleep? A field I look out on with the first cup of coffee is strewn with mottled rags of paper: sea gulls on their first foray, beating the crows to the worm [the field strewn with black and white wafting rags.] There is also the solitary crow who wakes up before dawn, and flies into the moon.

Late afternoon, the horde begins to reassemble, in various tree stands about a mile or so off from the Arboretum, no mass reassembly in the stadium, from their daily appointments all over town. And between six or seven, on a huge barge, filled with sand, for a construction project, pushed by a dwarfed tugboat through the Ship Canal towards the lake, hundreds of hitchhikers, bits of carbon paper, fleck the mounds, the pyramids of sand, joined by free-loaders that have been screaming their heads off in the poplar trees along both shores.

By the Ship Canal the other day, a half dozen swifts - swallows - were having their sport with "Rainbow Foot." He/she was sitting, minding his own business, on a pylon, they started to dive and swoop at him just the way I've seen him dive-bomb a gull. Coming from all sides, swiftly, all he could do was keep turning on the spot, his annoyed open cawing mouth snatching at the empty air, never even coming close to a bite.

My tailor suggests I collect a sufficiency of their feathers for protection against the inclemencies of the region. I could not agree more, but point out to him how tattered [zersaust] they look after a rain and wind soaked night.

Mr. Audubon wants me to take a more detailed look at the construction of the each feather and how they are layered, and I agree with him, too, that I need to be more myopic inspecting them, perhaps even become a vet and help free them of the bothersome infestations of mites. Lucky the crow that has a canal for a bird bath!

3] The variety of the sounds that crows make... their ordinary cawing, their *schmalzen* [to chirrup], click-sound-like, tongues clacking their palates, muy rapido, are they smacking their chops at the prospect of a handout, from someone with a soft spot for crows? They are also able to growl [knurren] like an angry Tomcat!... News gets around... They gargle... and purr... who is to make out what it means? Well, someone apparently did: Are they mimicking, have they learned sounds, words from other birds?

VOCALIZATIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE: Assembly Call Simple Scolding Call Modified Scolding Call Alert or Warning Call Dispersal or Alarm Call Distress Call Pre-mortality or Death Call Defensive Threat Calls Frustration Notes Immature Hunger and Feeding Call Adult Food Call Announcement Call Contact Call Duet Notes Courtship Vocalizations Juvenile Notes Contentment Notes Rattling Notes Wow-Wow Notes Carr-Carr Notes Whisper Notes Coo Notes Organ Notes Woo-ah Notes C.b. pascus Screams Ordinary Cawing Mimicry What a symphony that would be!

<http://www.shades-of-night.com/aviary/sounds/sounds.html><http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/animals/crow.html>

4] A southern bee-keeper I lived with told me the story of thousands upon thousands of crows who had come to mourn their chief, the rarest of rarest, a white crow, an albino. Apparently they mourned for days on end, and I don't think Marvin, that sly old warlock, was just putting me on.

P.S.:

I haven't seen "Old Yellow" for a few months, and I fear the worst. He/she has been replaced by "Blue Foot", whose behavior is pretty much the same. Heather mentioned that animals who have been handled by humans tend to live shorter lives. Perhaps. Even the crows that Indian kids would snatch from nests to make them their pets? Anyhow, there is one being who greets me – with open wings – when I go to Health Science Library. A very pretty dark blue band around his/her left foot, or ankle to be precise.

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